



86

— エイボタグス —

The dead taken in the field.
But they died there.

[SIDE
STORIES]

86—EIGHTY-SIX

Side Stories Collection

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86—EIGHTY-SIX School If



86

— エイトサックス —

The dead aren't in the field.
But they died there.

[EIGHTY
SIX]

ASATO ASATO PRESENTS



The number is the land which isn't
admitted in the country.
And they're also boys and girls
from the land.

Volume 1

Special Edition Bonus

“I think this isn’t weird, it’s ridiculous...”

The Eighty-Six, not deemed as humans, certainly would not have good food, clothes and habitats. The combat fatigues issued by the higher ups were goods gathering dust in the warehouse for many years, almost tattered.

It was a certain skill every Processor had to learn. Naturally, it all depended on the Processor, but...

“Why are you guys so good at sewing?”

“Who knows?”

Raiden was leaning on the cafeteria table, his hands holding up his face. Shin threaded through the camouflage fatigues with a torn sleeve as he retorted.

Next to him, Kurena was swinging her legs like a little girl, waiting for the clothing to be mended. Looking at her, Raiden was a little conflicted.

Right, Shin was not mending his own camouflage fatigues.

“It’s a gender reversal of roles here. You should be sewing your own clothes, Kurena.”

“I’m just bad at sewing.”

Kurena made it sound easy, but she was not bad at it. She was disastrously bad at it.

How ridiculous was it? For example, when she first reported to the squad, her skills were so bad that Shin had enough, and snatched it to mend it for her. Naturally, Shin did not do so out of gentlemanly goodwill, worried that the hard texture of the camouflage fatigues would hurt a woman’s hands. He was worried that too many threads would be bloodstained and wasted.

Ever since then, whenever Kurena’s clothing was damaged, she would rely on Shin to mend them, though not her undergarments. This probably ended up as her way of fawning around, or a wounded gazelle gambit to have a few more words with Shin.

As a bystander, Raiden had the opinion that due to such reasons, Shin thought of Kurena as a little sister who needed much care, and not as a woman.

“...Major. As a female, what do you think?”

Raiden directed the topic to Lena, who probably realized that Shin was busy sewing away.

For some reason however, Raiden received no answer, and raised an eyebrow.

“What is it?”

Raiden asked, and Lena, who remained silent the entire time, finally spoke up with scepticism,

“Erm.....what is this ‘sewing’?”

At that moment, everyone went silent.

And so, all those present just had to sigh.

“I thought you’re a pampered princess the entire time, but not this much...”

“Woah...this is way too ridiculous...”

“No way. You’re just bad at sewing buttons on, right, Major?”

And then, a long silence followed.

“...Sewing...buttons? Erm, buttons are stuck on clothes to begin with, no...?”

It appeared she did not know that buttons could fall off.

Clearly it showed how outstanding her maidservants were.

“Don’t tell me you don’t know what threading is?”

“.....Thread...ing.....?”

It seemed she knew not of sewing basics.

A dumbfounded Shin sighed hard, and Lena in turn was left a little flustered.

“Heh heh—” Kurena in turn was a little gleeful.

“Even I know how to do that, Major.”

“Eh! Is it embarrassing to be unable to do that? Really, Captain Nouzen!?”

Shin did not answer, but Raiden sensed that he was thinking the same thing, a little troubled by this.

It was utterly ridiculous.

Animate Bonus

“...Uuu.”

Shin sensed some weight leaning upon his hand. Looking down, he found that Kurena, who was playing with the cat, had fallen asleep.

With his hand nimbly keeping his unfinished book open, Shin went silent.

Kurena had fallen asleep, sounding blissful. To put it somehow, it seemed she had not grown mentally, let alone physically.

Whatever, Shin ignored the girl next to her, and continued reading. Surely she would wake up if she kept sleeping like this; if she did not, he could just call Anju over to deal with her.

So he thought, and his Para-RAID rang.

Lena, with her usual silver bell-like voice, said her usual greetings.

“...Good evening, Captain Nouzen.”

Ah, this isn't good.

So he instinctively thought, realized this thought was incomprehensible, and frowned.

...What's not good?

The usual gang was not around, as they were out dealing with maintenance or other matters. Shin was the only one in the room.

So Lena thought, but amidst the conversation, a breathing sound not belonging to Shin could be heard. She tilted her head.

This quiet breathing...was probably, someone sleeping.

“...Is there someone?”

“Well...Kurena's sleeping.”

It seemed Shin was unable to move as Kurena was clinging onto him.

After a short moment of imagination, Lena chuckled.

“Lieutenant Kukumila does appear to be a cute little sister.”

“She's latching onto me for some reason.”

Shin spoke with a perturbed tone, as though he brought a kitten home on a rainy day, and it got clingy to him. Lena sensed the pained look on Shin's face, and laughed.

At the same time, she could sense a stinging pain in the bottom of her heart.

...Eh?

By the time she realized it, this displeasure escalated. Why was it?

Why did she feel so angsty?

Lena sensed that she was rattled, and Shin, connected by the Para-RAID, would surely have noticed.

"...Major?"

"What is it?"

Lena spoke with a spiteful voice, one even she was startled by.

"No...did you just, seem a little peeved?"

"Not at all."

Again it happened.

"...You seem very unhappy."

"I am not!"

Shin went silent. Unlike what she was saying, Lena was grabbing the cushion next to her with enough force to strangle someone.

Redemption Festival

A fine layer of snow fell upon the Republic's capital, Liberté et Égalité, forming a decoration upon the shops at the revolution square. The redemption festival seemed exceptionally dazzling beneath the faint Winter sunlight.

Since ancient times, there was a fire festival of redemption during the harsh Winter right before Spring. As time passed, the solemn atmosphere of the festival too disappeared gradually, and it had become a simple activity.

The crowd was buzzing, for the festive spirit was in full spring. Twelve-year-old Lena suddenly stopped in her tracks.

The passers-by were either families, friends, or lovers, and Lena was alone. She had no love interest, and her father had long passed away. Her mother too was unwilling to attend, for such a place was unbecoming of her status. Lena, who had been skipping grades repeatedly, had only one friend of the same age, and thus, it was inevitable that she had nobody else to attend with.

I hope to become a soldier as soon as possible. Thus, Lena kept working hard for the day when she could heartily repay the man who helped her.

She did not regret it...at this moment, if she could work a little harder.

One day, she would be able to see the clear Winter skies afar, which she had last seen a long time back on those lands.

Is that person who saved me still fighting on under those skies?

She wanted to meet him again, for he said that he had to return to his brother. *Would that day come?*

He could continue to look up at the blue skies, all because of that conviction. Lena murmured, her lips pelted at by the freezing winds.

He was in a long abandoned, decrepit city, and there could not possibly have a shovel before him.

The white bones that had lost all blood and flesh were not so heavy, and at this point, even the wild beasts lost all interest in the corpses. It was a painful chore to try digging graves at the frozen dirt with only a combat knife, moreover for Shin, who was just twelve and had not gone through puberty.

It was likely the chore would have taken an entire day if not for Fido's help. At the very least, he managed to fill up the uneven ditch with dirt before night fell, and

leaned upon Fido, which was sheltering him from the cold, drinking the white soup of snow he boiled alone.

The Eighty-Six were not permitted to mark graves. There was no need to mark them with flowers anyway, for the ruins were covered by snow. It was snowing the previous day, and the sky was a clear blue, as though it was a big life. There was no sign of the living on the ground, and the words he wanted to say to his brother, long vanquished and reduced to bones, were gone without a trace.

What he buried were the bones remaining, and not his brother's soul.

The frozen dirt was as sturdy as metal, and the knife he used to shave for half a day was long damaged. The armor plate of his brother's Juggernaut was cut off by Fido, and it was blotting the faint sunlight.

The thin aluminium alloy armor, which could not fend against heavy machine gun fire, had the Personal Mark of a headless knight on it.

A soul had its head severed, but could not die.

At this point, Shin did not know why his brother had such a Personal Mark on the armor.

He leaned on the container, and did not move. Fido's optical sensors turned towards him, and the round camera flickered.

“...Pi.”

“Hm? Ahh...it's nothing. The chief mechanic's not going to worry about me not returning. He hates me.”

Shin grimaced as he thought of the young mechanic chief, a former Republic soldier, assigned to his squad.

Shin did not think of him as a bad person, but that he was worried about the teenage Processors, for he would not allow for them to die because of the “Reaper”.

And the squad captain, of the same age as the chief mechanic, really took care of Shin, the youngest in the squad, but unfortunately, he died in battle the previous night.

Everyone else in the squad,

“All the same.”

He had no one waiting for him to return. There was ‘nobody’ hoping for him to live to begin with.

Even so, I have to keep on living, even if that day keeps coming soon.

Shin looked away from the remains of his brother, and looked up at the sky, muttering despite nobody actually listening.

The Liberté et Égalité was several hundred kilometers away from the battlefield, and there was the Gran Mur, the minefield, and radar jamming between them. There was nothing to be conveyed between them.

Thus.

In a corner of the noisy, bustling streets celebrating the festival, without anyone noticing, a certain person looked up towards the skies above the Eastern battlefield.

“...It’s cold.”

In a corner of the abandoned battlefield, the empty ruins encased in snow, a certain person looked up towards the skies with the setting sun.

“...It’s cold.”

Neither of them realized that their white breaths, their scattered words, and their sights intersected each other.

TP

“It was purring at the building the Löwe blew up, and our eyes met when I looked at it. Even through the sensors, our hearts were connected~”

Daiya spoke of this cheap tragedy with a melodramatic, and caught in his fatigues was a black cat with white toes. The triangular ears and silver whiskers were twitching incessantly, purring with its distinct shrill voice.

“I guess its parents were crushed by the rubble or something. It’s so young. Can’t possibly live on alone.”

Shin, distracted from filling in the documents requesting for supplies, glanced aside at this crude hoorah, his usual icy red eyes showing utter disdain.

Even though there was no Legion activity surrounding them, Daiya opened the canopy before the battle ended, and Shin had been wondering what he was doing.

So Shin began to understand, while scouring around for any heavy, rigid movable objects near his desk.

“I’ll take care of you, little one. So...we can raise him, right, mama?”

Once he heard that, Shin took the hardest, heaviest dagger (cum knife) along with the sheath, and threw it over. Daiya expected that, and ducked by tilting his head aside...but the next roll of paper smacked him on the forehead, knocking him over.

The kitten hopped out from his arms, and Anju, having witnessed the whole situation, carried it and said, looking unmoved,

“Great retort to his folly, Shin.”

“Anju...at least show some concern for me...”

I do not know what that is. So Anju seemingly said as the kitten continued to purr within her hands.

“I need to have this little one washed up. Did you not say there is a wiping cloth, Shin? I shall be using that.”

“Nn.”

So Anju left with kitten in hand, and Daiya, having recovered in various ways, stood up as though nothing had happened.

He noticed Shin reach for an old book with thick leather cover and metallic edges, before repeating himself while correcting his foolish look.

“Can we raise it?”

“It’s fine if we don’t.”

Shin replied nonchalantly, and Daiya put a hand on his head, shaking it melodramatically.

“Ah, no, not that! Put it back, Shin! That’s a slab of metal, right?”

“...”

“Look, I was about to cry when I saw that one, so I promised to take care of it until the very end with tears, man. I don’t have a choice now! Can I raise it? Pretty please.”

“No point saying that now. I said to put it back, so do it. Without piloting the Juggernaut.”

It would take hours to reach today’s battleground on foot. While there appeared to be drone mines and Ameise roaming around, that was none of Shin’s business.

Daiya sensed the seriousness in Shin’s tone, and remained silent with his arms wide open. Shin let out a deep sigh.

Goodness gracious.

Hot Cocoa

Achoo, in the night so chilly their limbs were freezing, even his sneezing was unexpectedly cute.

“...It’s cold.”

“...”

“Stop complaining, you idiot.”

They spent almost half a year in the same squad. For him, there was no need to respond to the person who always spoke crudely.

Sigh, Raiden had enough of him. He hated this squad leader of his who was also thirteen years old, and could not understand that aloof attitude of his.

For some reason, they were holed up in a hut made of hard concrete. After much difficulty, they managed to peer beyond a double-layered glass window, and there was a scene of snow outside. The endless horizon was dyed a pure white, and the snowflakes fluttered while the stars littered the black velvet of the night.

The light of the new moon and the stars shone upon the endless snowflakes, covering the winter night battlefield a beautiful blue hue.

“It’s cold...why do we have to spend the night here?”

“It’s too cold, and we can’t hurry back to base. Not like we got a choice.”

As he had noted, Raiden was simply complaining, not wanting to listen to reason.

It was still cold. Even though there was a fire lit on the concrete floor, and that they took out spare blankets from the survival kit of the warehouse, it was still freezing. Aside from complaining, there was nothing to do.

But Shin would not understand. It was because of his direct retorts that Raiden would utter such nonsense.

Hmph, Raiden snorted. In that case, he had to find another way to gain warmth.

He poured some water, sugar, and the leftovers in the cocoa can into a pot, some canned milk, brought the mixture to the fire, and stirred it as he let it boil. The pot was a personal belonging in the survival kit, and everything else aside from the water was taken from the warehouse.

As the Legion advanced on the Republic's battlefield, whilst most of the land was abandoned by its evacuating people, such nutritious food that could be stored for a long time were rare to find.

He cut bits off the treasured chocolate bar found elsewhere with his bayonet cum knife, and Shin, looking interested, looked on.

"This is?"

"Hot cocoa...don't you know how to make this?"

Fact was that it was impossible to find such a thing in the Eighty-Six areas, but could be found within families, before they were deported here.

Shin showed a look of regret.

"Really...I can't cook."

"Can't cook? I see."

As to be expected, he's still a kid, so Raiden thought.

Immature he might be, they were both thirteen year olds, of similar age.

Nevertheless, to Raiden, Shin was unenthusiastic about cooking, rather than he could not cook.

...I see. I need follow the method, add the ingredients, and stir them carefully. Maybe this isn't suitable to make hot cocoa.

"So what are you holding?"

"That's not what the recipe says."

At that moment, Raiden started to recollect his memories.

"Brats at the dormitory...how nostalgic."

The time when he hid there along with them, his non blood-related friends whom he ate with.

Every night, they slept together in the cramped space...though annoying, it was satisfying, and the feeling wouldn't change.

It was unlikely there would be anyone left however.

He scratched his head, took up the pot, poured the contents into the aluminium mug, and handed it to Shin.

In his hands, were was a mug with steaming hot cocoa, its warmth reaching the palms. He blew aside the white steam, and Shin too did the same.

...How sweet. The sidelong face as he mumbled looked so immature.

But this guy just doesn't like sweet things, huh? So he thought as he took a sip of hot cocoa. The hot fluid slid down the throat, into the stomach, and he sighed.

Achoo. Even the way he sneezed was cute, though it was the second time.

“...It's still cold.”

Raiden grumbled again, but there was no response this time.

When did this guy... so he thought as he drank another sip of hot cocoa, the silent grumbles blending with the white breath in the darkness.

Gamers Bonus

“—That’s enough. Just leave the rest to me.”

“...Sorry.”

“Nothing we can do. Have a good sleep.”

Claymore, the first defensive squadron in the twenty-eighth combat ward. Raiden Shuga, the vice-leader, stood up from the creaking chair.

He exited the shabby room of the barracks, realized something, and turned back.

“Even if anything happens, don’t connect. If you connect in this delirious state, you’re going to cause everyone confusion.”

The hand by the blanket waved weakly in understanding, and Raiden closed the door.

He arrived at the hangar, where the few members were ready to sortie, and they all turned towards him.

The mortality rate of the Processors were extremely high, and no matter the squadron, they had to fight with excessively dwindling numbers. There were few of them this time however, not because most of them were killed in battle, but that a few of them, Shin being the most prominent, were bedridden due to flu. Even the oldest of them were in their teens. For the Processors who grew up in shoddy environments and incomplete physical developments, the flu was commonplace whenever winter began.

Leaving aside the unreliable rookies that were not to be taken as fighting strength, Raiden himself was a little bothered that both Shin and Daiya were unavailable, though his face did not betray that notion.

Thus, they could only rest for the moment. It was a good thing that they had lots of veterans around however.

Unlike them, most squadrons had to send everyone to battle, including the wounded and the sick, and it was practically a death sentence. In fact, most that were forced to sortie in such situations never got to return from the battlefield.

Suddenly, he noticed a boy giving an uneasy look.

“...We’re going to be fine, right...even though our leader isn’t around...”

The boy probably never meant that, but Theo grimaced, for they were not out of the woods even with him around. Kurena, who was of similar age to the boy, was suddenly furious.

The boy's platoon leader, Anju, gave a kind smile.

"A little advice for you since you like to be around him so much, Rito...you will be the first to die if you rely on Shin in battle too much."

Ehhh, so Rito widened his eyes. On this battlefield, their squadron leader was a 'terrifying' ally.

"You have to prioritize orders and warnings based on the situation. After all, you have been receiving help all the time. Children who decide for themselves and not rely on anyone cannot survive after all. But...Shin, and us, we cannot be protecting all of you forever."

The tender looking little face of the pre-pubescent boy froze up, having recalled the reality they were in.

The battlefield they lived on was one where every single person could die as easily as they lied.

Rito was on the verge of tears, and Raiden rubbed the little head that was a lot shorter than him. It was normal for him as the vice-leader, so he did not say much more,

"Well, we have enough people today...so relax, we're not going to let you die. He looks like he doesn't care, but he really is worried."

Don't connect when you're not in good shape man. Raiden really had the urge to strangle Shin with cables.

As Raiden had said, every single person returned safely after defeating the Legion. Shin probably already knew it, for he had already left the bed, and was waiting for them. Raiden frowned.

"Didn't I say that you should rest a little more, you idiot?"

"Feeling a little better. Better inform everyone of the bad news."

Shin said, looking fresher than he was in the morning, but still suffering. *What's so important?* So Raiden thought, swallowing his voice back.

"Bad news?"

"We're notified of where we're to be deployed next."

Daiya, lying on the bed as well, got up in a jiffy. The usually jovial blue eyes were completely awake.

The deployment at each ward was to be half a year, as a precaution against the Processors colluding for a rebellion. Once the period expired, they would be temporarily disbanded and regrouped. Shin and Raiden had been at this squadron for five months, and it was not strange for them to be regrouped and redeployed elsewhere.

Raiden stared back quietly with a skeptical look, and Shin said with his unflappable stoic tone.

His bloody eyes was a little icy.

“Including me, all platoon leaders and above are assigned to the first ward, first defensive squadron.”

An eavesdropping Rito gasped. Raiden narrowed his eyes grimly.

First combat ward, first defensive squadron.

“...Spearhead?”

The defensive squadron located on the frontmost, the harshest battlefield on the eastern front.

It had the most KIA on the battlefield with no deaths.

Their squadron leader, given the nickname of the Reaper, showed a cold, tragic smile, even though it was for a single moment.

Manga Release Special Edition

—*Thud thud.*

There was a crisp sound of a rattling wire unbefitting of the abandoned city, which was ravaged by the battle for nine years, and Kujo stopped in his tracks. The tall man was wearing a desert camouflage field uniform that was in the Dead Stock and did not fit the terrain. His black hair was tied in a braid behind his head, and he had the distinctive black skin of his people.

“...What?”

The intermittent voice echoed through the mostly ravaged residences after the previous day’s battle. They were akin to the whispering of a broken star. Or the prayer of a dying warrior.

Shin had determined that there was no Legion activity in the surrounding area on this day. Despite that, Kujo did not let out his guard as a precaution, and reached his hand towards a detached door....

Entering his eyes through the gaps between the broken bricks and wood of the original ceiling and pillars was light, which he was unused to.

“...*Undertaker. Is it fine now?*”

“Yes, Handler One, if you don’t mind our work here.”

The sudden silvery-bell like voice of the young female Handler girl who was of the same age came out of the Para-RAID. Shin was not taken aback, and did not stop moving his hands.

This Para-RAID was a device for people within the walls to monitor the Eighty-Six in the distant battlefield. Shin was already used to his feelings being ignored in his nearly five years of fighting.

“*Work, huh? I do not have a report about that, so—*”

“.....”

It was about Kujo.

“I’m sorting through the remaining belongings of Sirius, who’s KIA days ago.”

Ah, Shin could hear the Handler’s little gasp.

“...*My apologies.*”

“Don’t mind. It’s nothing to us Eighty-Six.”

They would fight on the battlefield In place of the citizens of the Republic until they died.

“I,”

“—This.”

Shin ignored the Handler who was about to say something, and picked up the object that caught his attention.

He was holding a very light silver bird cage artefact that was smaller than his palm. The exquisitely carved blue bird was perched on the supporting wood, which itself wrapped with vines and inlaid with precious stones. It looked very delicate and clever, completely unlike Kujo’s interest...

“A music box...huh?”

“The surface is a little dented, but the inside should be fine. It probably can ring.”

So said Daiya, who repaired the bird cage base that was thicker than a real one. He had an interest in repairing complex machinery.

Whenever there is no battle, everyone in the squadron would like to gather in the mess hall of Spearhead. For some reason, the Handler on the other end of the Para-RAID held his breath like a kitten showing curiosity for some reason. But this is not just as simple as a simple playing device, it should exist as something like an orchestra.

It was hard to see something this fancy in the Eighty-Sixth District, and Kurena, being all sparkly eyed,

“It’s so beautiful... ah.”

“Ah, it’s pretty, and complicated inside. It’s the beauty of precision machinery.”

Daiya gloated away for some reason, and Theo snorted.

“I didn’t expect Sirius to be like this. Only girls would like such things, no matter how you look at it.”

“Maybe he got it back for Artemis. Sirius always spoiled her like a little sister.”

Anju responded, *Ahhhh*, and Theo clammed up. They, who were well experienced in combat, were already used to such things.

Raiden muttered.

“We’ll be able to catch up with that Sirius.”

Kaie spun the nut of the music box, seemingly to break the silence. It had been placed indoors for nine years, but the structure was still in working condition, and the sound was exceptionally crisp, a delicate sound of a crystal craft being tapped at spread in the dusty air.

It was a short and simple tune. Its internal structure was complex, unbefitting of an impression of a music box, until the moment when the solemn musical sound came through the open mouth of the delicate bird.

It was serene, like a fleeting prayer.

“...What is this song? Handler One?”

Theo’s offhanded question left the Handler momentarily speechless. She said in a slightly flustered tone

“Erm...my apologies. I do not know much about music...”

“So...Undertaker, do you know? Just asking.”

Shin recalled his few memories, and said,

“...It’s probably an old folk song. It’s a language that’s no longer used.”

“I see. What’s that song?”

The tune was short because the lyrics themselves were short. There were only a few words used. The translation was—...

“Saying goodbye, one day.”

The Heavenly Blue in the Darkness

The Eighty-Six, who were robbed of their human rights by their country and forced to fight the unmanned units of the Legion on the frontlines, were not exactly fighting all day long.

In her room in the peaceful capital that was far away from the front line, Lena flipped the catalog pamphlets given by the salespeople wandering outside the department store, and listened to the movements on the other side, her hearing synchronized through the Para-RAID,

“Anyway, is it not dangerous to walk around outside the battle area alone?”

Shin was exploring a ruined city in a corner of the battle zone, searching for supplies, and he seemed to shrug, saying,

“Nothing will happen. I assume you know that there aren’t any Legion around here.”

“That may be so, but there may be wolves or tigers or bears roaming around.”

“They’ll also be targeted by the Legion in the heat of the battle, so they won’t be running out from their territories. They resemble humans somewhat, so humans will assume they’re landmines and won’t try to approach them.”

And there aren’t any tigers nearby, so Shin calmly retorted. Lena pursed her lips, and then opened them.

Shin might have noticed something. Compared to the beginning, they were starting to discuss some random topics.

“You seem to be happy...what are you doing now?”

“Eh? ...Ah, well.”

Shin suddenly thought of something, and let out a chuckle. While it was a different purpose, it certainly resembled shooting out the gunpowder blocking a barrel.

“Just comparing and picking out cannons.”

“.....Is this, interesting?”

“Hm, Well, I think you must be quite happy right now...it’s more like you to say such things.”

The Para-RAID allowed for individuals to communicate voices to each other through the collective subconsciousness, and also the feelings as though they were face to face. At this moment, the stoic Shin, who was in the midst of being connected, felt a sense of joy that was rare of him.

In any case, he found the entrance to an underground building that he had never entered before.

Then, holding a light stick in one hand, he ventured in as though he was exploring a maze.

The Eighty-Six were confined in the concentration camps, devoid of entertainment since childhood, raised in a battlefield with their futures uncertain, and they had a strong desire to find fun in the little things of daily mundane life.

The favorite pastime of boys in particular would probably be an adventure or secret base or the like.

The silent footsteps were unspeakably light, and probably nobody would assume one was wandering around. Lena giggled when she saw Shin's desire to find something no matter the cost.

"It would be nice to find something, like an ancient relic, a pirate's treasure, or something like that."

"We're inland. It's probably a subway ruin. Those things you mentioned won't be around."

Shin noted wryly to Lena who was being giddy and all by herself, and then seemed to stop in his tracks. The boots he usually wore usually wouldn't cause any footsteps to be heard, but from afar, he could hear loud clunks. It seemed this place was rather spacious.

Hundreds of kilometers away from the fortress wall, a boy she was not exactly familiar with took a quiet breath.

"...If only the vision can also be synchronized—would be great if you can see what I'm seeing."

There was no way to know what this place was meant for. A little further on was a patch of darkness, and a lapis blue shone in a blur within this place which size was unknown.

There was an empty hole in the ceiling connected to the ground, from which the thin white sunlight of summer shone into the basement. Perhaps it was formed by the rainwater that had gathered, for the clear water caused the vast, fluttering,

swaying blue light to enter the darkness like underground water. The statue of the Saint that seemed to be used for decoration was smiling quietly in the lapis blue and white light.

Shin walked towards the edge of the swaying water like a Reaper without footsteps.

“...In Eastern religions, blue is the color of the land of the dead, and butterflies seem to symbolize the souls of the dead in all cultures.”

The source of that blue light was actually the blue butterfly wings formed by the wreckage of countless Legion generators that had sunk in the water. They had been shot down by cannons here in the past...and perhaps this was where they died.

Stop saying that, Lena said in a strong tone. Shin let out a little chuckle at this very annoying commander—who had deemed all the dead Eighty-Six as humans.

“Ah, actually, I also do not believe in this...but.”

Even though he knew there’s no heaven nor hell, he would piously narrow his eyes as he looked up at it, towards a certain place.

“It wouldn’t be bad if this was what greeted me at the end.”

In the midst of the floating lapis blue, a faint white light shone upon on the smiling marble statue of Saint, depicting a silvery white glow.

Toranoana Collab

“—And when I had a close look, there were many green lights on the river surface, flashing...”

“Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah, shut up aaaaaaaaaa.....!”

“Hiiiiiiiiii.....!”

Shin returned after pouring himself some coffee, and found Kaie crouching in the corner of the room, covering her ears; behind her was Theo, sitting on a chair with its backrest facing forward, muttering something with glee on his face; and beyond the Para-RAID synchronization, the Handler girl seemed to feel the same as Kaie did.

It was a stormy night beyond the window, a very fitting sight for the situation at hand. They didn’t know how the night was in the distant first ward.

“That river was the site of a tragic battlefield a long, long time ago. Which means the vengeful ghosts of the ancient soldiers were woken up by our...”

“I told you to shut up! Theo, you idiot! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

Shin was sure they were fireflies.

Kaie was tearing up and yelling, and their Handler dared not to make single sound, Shin wanted to tell the truth, but couldn’t.

It wasn’t because he thought the sight of the young girl huddled up and trembling like a timid rabbit was amusing—absolutely not.

“...It is quite unexpected, Handler One. I thought you wouldn’t have believed in such unscientific stories.”

It seemed the Handler girl lifted her head.

“Ye-Yes! This isn’t scientific, it’s a superstition! Ghosts don’t exist in this world, Laughing Fox!”

“Then can you prove scientifically that ghosts don’t exist? You can’t, right? That means...”

“Nooooooooooooo! I beg you, please stop——!”

It was impossible to something didn’t exist, but even so, it didn’t mean it truly ‘existed’.

So Shin thought, but he didn't say so. Theo propped his chin with both his hands on the backrest, and shot him a side glance.

"Nice timing, Undertaker. Have you ever experienced 'this kind' of a supernatural event?"

"No."

"What?"

Shin was quick to deny. Theo snorted at him, disappointed.

Then, Shin suddenly recalled something and turned back to look at the stairs he'd just climbed. It was a strange thing, but it might not have count.

"...Anyway is someone outside right now? I saw someone's shadow knocking on the window at the stair landing."

""Chotto a minute!""

When the others in the room shrieked, Shin frowned.

"...Why the sudden scream?"

"What do you mean 'sudden'? It's really weird, okay! I can't laugh at this joke!"

"It's raining like a waterfall out there! Who'd be stupid enough to go out? It's impossible to stand outside the landing either. And besides, weren't you the only one who went to the dining hall just now?!"

Then in other words—

"I see. So it wasn't a living thing?"

""Don't say anymore!""

After their screams, Shin immediately fell silent.

Theo and Kaie were rubbing the goosebumps off their arms.

"Ah, seriously, can you really say you haven't had any supernatural experiences? If you ask me, you just don't care!"

"It's frightening! Undertaker's story is the most frightening!"

On the other end of the connection, beyond the commotion of the Processors, one could sense that the Handler girl had suddenly toppled over as if some kind of limit had been broken.

Almost as if it could hear the noise coming from the second floor of the barracks, Fido, who was returning after recovering recyclable items, halted in its path.

An exquisite metal statue stood in Fido's container. It was found inside the ruins of a building that collapsed during battle a few days ago. The beautiful statue was polished, goddess-like, and silvery-white, and because it had knocked into the windows of barracks a few times, it stood at a slight angle.

Fido's optical sensor flickered momentarily, and it nonchalantly went towards the automated plant's smelting furnace.

Like other recyclable items, the goddess statue was tossed into the smelter. Yep, after a day of hard work, the diligent Scavenger returned to its standby position.

Sword of Rotting Bone

Night descended upon the battlefield, which was covered by the Passion flowers that were unbecoming of the season.

Once he realized his vision was dominated by blue, the madness of the battle faded, and Shin recovered.

He scanned the battlefield through the optical monitor of the Juggernaut, and nobody was moving there. There was merely the Legion wreckage that had rolled between the flowers, emitting black smoke. Some of the flames were already put out, anchored to the ground. It was an endless battlefield of wilderness, devoid of neither enemies nor humans, unmanaged by humans for a very, very long time.

For a moment, he wondered if he was the only one left, but he quickly abandoned that thought.

His comrades who accompanied him on the Special Reconnaissance Mission were still alive. However, he had pulled away from them as he was immersed in the battle.

He directed his consciousness towards the Para-RAID, and it seemed Raiden sighed. With an impatient tone, the latter told him, *Get back here already, you idiot.*

Got it, after a brief reply, Shin cut off the connection, and hopped off the Juggernaut.

The evening had faded, and gone was the clear blue from before. The golden sunset turned dark once again, to a cold night sky. It seemingly reflected a celestial body, the boundaries nary to be seen, and a turquoise shone from the sky into the earth.

Looking back, his Juggernaut, which had fought alongside them, was covered in scars all over, both armor and weapons, after the long march here. It blended well with the rotting bone-like armor, and looked like a headless, decaying white bone.

The high frequency blade was broken during the first battle of the reconnaissance mission, and after switching to the spare, it broke once again. The sharp severed blade reflected a slightly dull light.

How long had they carried out this mission? They had progressed through a long distance, and at this point, the land beneath them was no longer Republic's.

Recalling the words that were said to him, he suddenly narrowed his eyes.

At this moment, that Handler, Lena.

The Republic's capital, Liberté et Égalité, had few tall buildings due to restrictions, and the cold-toned blue spread in the vast night sky.

She ended work early. Lena was on her way home through the courtyard before the main gates of the Republic Army Headquarters, when she suddenly stopped in her tracks. She looked up towards this unique turquoise.

The sun had long set during this late autumn, and the night began. Winter was coming, the dim sky of this season of death.

Under the same sky,

Are Shin and the others still fine? Or,

Where are they now? Where are they going?

I have made it here. When is Lena going to catch up?

Shin stared at the blue flower field that had turned dark beyond the setting sun.

He had entrusted his wish until that moment, after the war. Or perhaps, while the war was still going on.

The endless field of Passion flowers continued to bloom blue.

The vines that should have reached towards the sky lost their support and lay prone on the ground. They bore the Cross that symbolized sin.

They continued to advance through the Legion controlled wilderness that was devoid of people, continued fighting, and had no idea where they were. There were times when he could not tell if he was alive or not, and over the long days of advancing and battle, he thoroughly felt that something within him was being eroded.

Despite that.

—The flowers shall bloom again.

Behind him was the Juggernaut with his personal mark—the headless skeleton, resembling the rotting bones on the wilderness.

The bones of the warrior might have snapped, but they were still sharp as a sword, or a lance.

He hoped that one day, even after experiencing the trials and tribulations of the battlefield, her face would not lose its sharpness unwittingly.

Manga Volume 1 Short Story: For Nameless Soldiers Have No Graves

“Undertaker...!?”

Shin gave a mystified look towards the soldier in the blue uniform of the Republic army who murmured with a trembling voice. They were in the Eighty-Sixth District of the Republic, the frontline base of Spearhead Squadron, First Ward on the Eastern Front. Half a year after he was reassigned to this base, Shin stood before the barracks that had faded under the weather and sunlight.

The walls were completely discoloured, and on it was graffiti of an upside-down Republic five-colored flag.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing...”

The soldier stammered and tried to brush it off, averting his eyes. He was a skinny, timid soldier belonging to the manpower division, and did not have the disposition of a proper soldier...the Eighty-Six were not deemed as humans, but for some reason, their intel were not provided by the military armory, but by the manpower division.

The ethos of the Republican army was an ‘Advanced Unmanned drone and humane defenses’, and thus they had no combatants. As a result, the Republican soldiers who would only look at the procedures during the monthly airlift of resupply and redeployment obviously could not be called soldiers. One had to wonder if they knew how to fire a gun, and some were still terrified of the Eighty-Six, who were deemed inferior to them. They were facing caged beasts, but they were terrified like kids.

The soldier before him was one of those timid ones.

Shin nonchalantly witnessed such unsightliness. He did not know how the Republic citizens viewed him. At this point, the Eighty-Six were like animals, feared like beasts, scorned as domesticated livestock in human form.

The soldier closed his eyes, as though trying to escape the emotionless eyes.

And thereafter, with an extremely official tone that was initially shocked and rattled.

“—Internment number E022-23093. Retake the photo. Over here.”

The term of service at each ward of the Republic's Eighty-Sixth District was half a year in principle. Every half year, the squadrons would be reorganized and redeployed. Such was a measure to prevent the Processors from colluding and planning an insurgency.

Every reorganization would require a reshoot of photo, and after his photo was taken for official documentation, Shin arrived before the soldier. He raised his numbered plate at the wall where the height measurement was drawn upon, and the photo resembled one of a convict. The Eighty-Six were not deemed as human, and all personal information, including their names, would be erased from the Republic's administration system, only to be recognized as their serial numbers.

As it was casually written by hand, the words were a little skewed. Suddenly, he noticed the number shown.

The first four digits denoted the camp number, while the latter five were the internee's. The last numbers would be used whenever there was a photo shoot after every reorganization, every communication during battle, and every battle report. He could remember it no matter how he hated so.

And there were many who had forgotten his name.

—*Shin.*

Suddenly, he heard someone call for him. He looked over.

He could not forget...not his comrades.

Simply put, names were similar to this serial number, just a symbol for identification purpose—

However, the process of taking photos and reassignment was merely a necessary one for the Republican Army, and was worthless to the Processors.

Though they were just taking photos again, they required all twenty four members to take turns. They were all in their teens, at the age of vigor. Around him, his comrades were unable to withstand their loneliness, and started a ruckus.

Kurena, who had returned from having her photo taken, kicked a little pebble that was one the grass. A boy called Kino seemed to have his competitiveness piqued by this unexpected scene, and kicked a scattered nail farther away. In a short moment, it ended up as a contest to see who could kick the thing furthest.

The Republic soldiers wielding guns were in charge of transport, and while they were appalled to see the livestock fool around, they would not stop them....base included, all the facilities in the Eighty-Sixth District were hundreds

of kilometres away from the Gran Mur, and they were isolated from the Republic mainland by the anti-human/tank mines. Even if left unmanaged, the Eighty-Six had nowhere to escape to.

Theo killed a rusted screw towards the upside-down five colored flag. In an instance, the rules of the kicking contest changed to one where points would be given for which colors they hit. Unwittingly, they stopped kicking, and ended up throwing.

Shin always thought it was messy, for usually speaking, it would end up as some mysterious game where they would kick something upside down. Thus, he intended to keep his distance away from this commotion.

Daiya, probably guessing what Shin was thinking, smiled,

“Shinei-kun? Stop watching and show off once in a while, will you?”

“...Alright.”

No way out since he was called out.

He looked down at the double-headed bolt at his feet, stomped on it hard to let it fly, timed it right, grabbed the bolt that was spinning in the air, and threw it in one fell swoop.

Swoosh, in an instant, the long-shaped double-headed bolt pierced the middle of the five-colored flag.

After that, everyone fell silent, including his comrades, the mechanics who were half stunned and smiling, along with the Republic soldier.

“...Too strong.”

“I guess the... ‘Headless Undertaker of the Eastern Front’ is the real deal...”

“...”

In fact,

It was all a coincidence.

Though it was, Shin did not want to explain, and merely remained silent. Raiden, who had been assigned to the same squadron and spent the most time with him, understood the reason for that silence, and laughed silently.

The soldier from manpower division seemed to have taken their photos before Shin realized so, for the former approached.

“Nice friendship you all have...are you familiar with them?”

Shin raised an eyebrow. It was rare for a Republican soldier to not insult them, let alone chit-chat with them.

“...Yeah. We’re all assigned here after all.”

First Ward on the Eastern Front, First Defensive Spearhead Squadron, comprised of Processors who had served the longest—the squadron of elites that had survived several years on this deadly battlefield.

At that moment, the soldier quieted down...*So, only some of you?* One could hear his murmur.

Shin ignored him and looked at the camera in his hand. It was a Polaroid camera that would develop photos on the spot, a rarity nowadays.

The Eighty-Six had no grave to rest. The photo taken would be discarded when they died or be reassigned.

But even so—

“Can I ask of you...just one?”

The silvery moon-like eyes did not look back...Shin continued on, pointing at ‘that’.



Manga Volume 2 Short Story: One Early Summer's Day

This place was probably a freezer meant to create ice for an ice rink.

It was early summer out there, but the place was still covered with frost, and Kaie looked around the spacious basement room, astounded.

The war resulted in the power supply being interrupted, but the place was still filled with ice, and this freezer had the properties of an ice cave in this very insulated basement. One had to wonder when the cracks appeared on the ceiling, for snow blew into the cracks, and the result was that there was melted ice every summer.

Despite that, she was momentarily speechless as she saw all the snow that piled up—

Behind her was Shin, who was exploring the ruins,

“...Is this?”

“Shin, just to ask you something unimportant.”

“Oh.”

Klang, vroom vroom vroom.

The heavy air flow echoed through, and the Juggernaut Kaie piloted kicked over a large cauldron that was wrapped in an abandoned blanket.

It rolled down the base hangar, onto the cracked concrete floor.

“If, just if, a girl attacks you in the middle of the night, and she’s a comrade, what will you do?”

Shin kicked away the mysterious large cauldron while in his Juggernaut and answered, frowning in surprise.

They had the cannon on the back lifted, their cockpits opened as they piloted with their bodies exposed to the elements. The two mecha weapons infamous for being destitute kicked away at this makeshift soccer ball while letting out noisy footsteps, while Aldrecht watched on with an appalled, helpless look.

“What do you mean, attack in the middle of the night?”

“Eh.”

Kaie was stunned to hear the unexpected answer.

That kick missed completely, and she hastily gave chase after the large cauldron, kicking it back...she had to kick it while it was rolling, for it would be difficult to do so from a standing stop.

The surprised Shin continued,

“Tickle my head while I’m sleeping?”

“I don’t mean that attack. It’s not what you think, but,”

“I can’t answer when I don’t know what it is.”

“That...erm...”

It was a question she raised, but Kaie was too embarrassed to explain.

She blushed, seeking words that would not be that upfront, but suddenly thought of something, and smiled.

Perhaps this unreasonable prank was permissible.

“...You know what it means, don’t you, Shin...it’s not nice to have a female say such a thing.”

Shin narrowed his eyes as he looked over, and snorted,

His Juggernaut kicked the cauldron, and a somewhat violent sound rolled over.

“Your question’s difficult to answer...I’m not being loose. I just overheard.”

The usually stoic boy spoke with a somewhat unhappy tone. Kaie showed a wry smile.

She, who had seen him on the battlefield, would forget that Shin was in fact two years younger than her.

If he was deemed human, he would be at the age where he would be treated as a kid.

“...I guess. Sorry...forget about it.”

How would this boy before her react if someone actually did so? She was actually somewhat curious.

After a moment of silence, the footsteps of the Juggernauts and the rumblings of the cauldron eased.

Kaie pondered over that silence.

This large cauldron had to keep moving within a certain period, and it was too boring just kicking around silently. They did kill some time with idle chat, but the topic ended.

They started off with word solitaire, and it would have been one thing if children were playing, but the players were the sixteen-year-old Shin and the eighteen-year-old Kaie. They did not actually come up with words, and merely answered briefly. After five minutes or so, they started to get tired. Shin used Shakespearean titles, while Kaie checkmated herself with flower names, and before they knew it, the game ended.

The stoic Shin probably would not feel bored or awkward by this silence, but Kaie was different, and she had to find something to break this silence.

As she looked at the large cauldron rumbling between the two units, she suddenly thought of something, and said,

“Over here, when we talk about summer, we think of ‘that’...at the country my ancestors were born in, there’s something called Ramune that’s a necessity.”

Kaie had never been to the country where many of her people lived.

Located at the Eastern end of the continent was the homeland she was unfamiliar with, probably miraculously surviving the yoke of the Legion.

The complex emotions of nostalgia and homesickness lingered in her heart, and she smiled. Her ancestors moved to the Republic, and for Kaie, who came generations later, that country was her origin. She could hardly say the language of that country, and could only understand the foreign homeland through some basic terms, traditions, and bits of culture.

Even if she wanted to return, she had no chance.

The homeland she should return to was not that foreign one.

Shin, unable to know what Kaie was thinking, suddenly blinked at the topic she started.

He was not particularly interested, but he chimed on,

“That is?”

“It’s a unique refreshing soda flavor with sweet carbonic acid, stored in a glass bottle. The bottle has a glass bead inside, and when you hold down the top of the bottle while drinking, the glass bead pops out.

It was something he had never seen before in the Republic—not on the battlefields of abandoned streets, one with an exotic packaging and opening method. He leaned forward slightly, somewhat interested with the Ramune.

“Sounds interesting. How’s it made?”

“I don’t know either. I’ve never seen it before.”

“...”

Shin looked as though the rug was pulled out beneath him, and he went silent.

He could tell Kaie was chuckling. It was payback from before.

Shin however remained silent, and lowered his bloody red eyes, pondering.

After a while, he said,

“...You don’t know?”

They did not know, for they had never seen one before.

“Do you want to try it out—once?”

At that moment, Kaie went silent.

She felt forlorn, for she only knew of the homeland her ancestors were from.

In hindsight, she knew that he had seen through her isolation and loneliness.

Speaking of which, Shin too was born in the Republic, but his family was from another country; the neighboring Empire of Giad that developed the Legion and caused the entire continent to be devoured in chaos. Shin, a mixed blood between the ruling Onyx and Pyrope, had the rich bloodlines of two great nobility flowing within him.

However, he merely inherited their bloodlines. He had never been to the Empire, not when he was detained in the Eighty-Sixth District, nor before the war against the Legion started.

He was abandoned by the country he was born in, and did not know the country he came from.

And also, he had nowhere to go.

Perhaps Shin too could empathize with this isolation and loneliness.

“Hm, if it can happen...”

The alarm clock (a kitchen alarm they found in the abandoned streets) rang.

The cauldron so happened to roll to the feet of the Juggernaut. Kaie switched off the power unit, and hopped off.

Shin too hopped off his unit, and they went to that cauldron.

“...It’s almost done, isn’t it?”

“I guess so. Couldn’t hear any flowing water for a while now.”

They wore the gloves they had prepared beforehand, peeled off the tape wrapped on the blanket, and unravelled it.

The exposed surface of the cauldron was rock solid. This cauldron was ready to be disposed.

They peeled off the tape sealing the opening, and contained within was large amount of melted ice and sealed containers of various sizes.

“But you really know about these things. Did you see it somewhere before?”

“Probably. It’s not something I’d want to eat in the winter, so I didn’t think about it until just now since we didn’t have the chance.”

They took the largest container, shook it a few times to check the sound, opened it to check the contents, and Shin nodded.

“It’s solid.”

“We did it. Got to call the others.”

Kaie nodded, and activated the Para-RAID.

She was contacting the entire Spearhead squadron, along with the maintenance crew that was waiting nearby.

This was for everyone, so the cauldron was extremely heavy as they had loaded so much ice, and could only roll it about using the Juggernaut.

On a side note, Shin’s idea was to tie the cauldron onto Fido and have it jump about for thirty minutes or so. Fido, who was present, appeared to be very enthused, but due to heating reasons, the proposal was unfortunately rejected.

“Sorry to keep everyone wait...it’s actually our first time eating it after coming to this Eighty-Sixth District.”

The ingredients were canned unsweetened condensed milk, sugar, wild rose and violet jam for coloring and fragrance, and finally salt and ice.

It was said that by mixing a certain percentage of ice and salt, the temperature would fall below zero.

This was the principle used.

“Ice cream’s done.”

Volume 2

Special Edition

The Republic was not kind enough to let the Eighty-Six into the eighty-five areas, even though they theoretically had the same citizenship. However, it was expected of them to have the luxury of raising a cat. Obviously, there was something wrong about this.

The feed was made of synthesized protein, but the factory label indicated it as a bright, posh feed. For a moment, Lena was lost in silent emptiness.

The Republic borders were completely surrounded by the Legion, and the cat feed utilized important resources, made from the automated plants. Lena never ate them before, but she felt it was a lot better than the synthesized food made for the Concentration Camps and frontline bases.

She was not asking for everyone not to raise cats, but she assumed they should have prioritized accordingly.

She sighed, and opened the can, pouring the synthesized protein, which was meaninglessly labelled as some flavor with some sauce, onto the plate.

“Here. This is for you.”

She knelt down, and placed the plate before a black cat with white feet that was by a pillow in the corner.

It was the kitten Shin and the Spearhead members raised at the barracks. It had seen them leave on the last mission they could never return from, and was left to Lena along with their last message. For them, this kitten might have symbolized a moment of rare peace.

The kitten merely glanced aside at the cat feed placed before it, one that was made with much futility.

And it callously looked aside.

It seemed to have hated the synthesized protein. The Spearhead members went hunting during their free time, and the kitten might have enjoyed proper food as a result.

Or in another way...the kitten might have hated the life of being taken within the walls for inexplicable result.

This wretch the Eighty-Six raised is so filthy! Due to her mother's protests, this kitten could only remain in Lena's room for the time being. She was busy

commanding and assisting, and had no time to accompany it all day. There was nary a bug or bird flying outside or window, for this ‘natural environment’ of the First Sector was completely sprayed with insecticide and herbicide.

At Spearhead, it could have strolled about freely, saw various fun insects or little animals everywhere...and most importantly, lots of people to play with at the Spearhead barracks. Surely that life would be a lot better.

“...Sorry. You are feeling lonely, right? Everyone else is gone.”

Lena gently stroked the fine fur. The shriveled kitten opened one of its sharp eyes, looking up.

Lena, looking back at it, gave a tragic smile.

“I too feel...it is lonely without everyone around.”

It had been a while since she saw the last five Spearhead members vanish into the Eastern front, but every night, at the appointed time, she would unwittingly contact them on the Para-RAID. She was eager for the nightly moments of interaction, along with the poised voice that was always the first to respond.

—Good work, Handler One.

Shin.

How far have you gone?

Where—are you now?

Are you dead, or sleeping?

I feel really lonely...not knowing anything.

The kitten she was supposed to comfort suddenly stood up, rubbing its face onto her palm. She picked it up, putting it close to her chest, and heard its feeble purr.

I feel lonely.

So it seemed to be saying to her.

“—Yes.”

I am really lonely—because you are not around.

Gamers Bonus

Frederica was used to eating alone, and thus, it was the first time she was eating together with boys and girls of similar ages, though older.

Her foster father in name Ernst was often busy with work, and hardly returned home. The maidservant Teresa would be doing her duties during mealtime, and never ate at the same time. Such was before they ‘arrived at the residence’.

And thus.

“—Do eat as thou please!”

Though one could never remember that many dishes, the tastes experienced during childhood would last for eternity. Over the past week, Teresa gathered many recipes, practiced on them, and was able to make various dishes from the Republic of San Magnolia. The plates served on the tables were instantly cleared however, leaving Frederica flabbergasted.

She was only halfway done with hers, looking completely stunned as her fork and knife were raised in the air. Ernst and Teresa, having anticipated this, were silently grimacing away.

Shin, Raiden and Theo were in the midst of puberty, so it was expected they would eat lots. Anju and Kurena had stopped growing in height, but their developments as females were only just beginning. They, having lived on the arduous battlefield for long periods, had more muscle mass than others of their age, their BMR relatively higher, and the calories intake higher than usual.

This much food should be sufficient however.

Nevertheless.

Teresa tilted her head worriedly.

“Is this sufficient? I can make a few more dishes.”

“Ahh...no need, it’s enough. It’s great.”

The conversation between Teresa and Raiden had Frederica looking terrified.

“Wait, art thou not satisfied...? How much more...?”

Kurena licked away the sauce by her lips, snorting,

“You can’t grow if you don’t eat more, pipsqueak.”

Uu, so Frederica looked back at Kurena and Anju, and then down at her...chest.

Surely there was a stark difference.

They were big, and in contrast, hers was a little.....understated (to put it nicely).

“...Really?”

Theo gruffly supported his head off the table with his elbow,

“What are you looking at anyway, you early bloomer?”

“What is with that!?”

“Frederica, don’t stand when you eat.”

Ernst’s attention was somehow diverted.

“What do thou mean, early bloomy!? As a nine-year-old, thy has become a fine lady...”

“In other words, just a brat.”

“Well...we do understand how you feel, but it is a little too early to be concerned by this...?”

“If you force yourself to eat when you can’t grow tall, you’ll just grow fat anyway.”

Shin flatly interrupted as per usual, and Frederica clenched her fists firmly, stomping hard on the floor.

“Su-such inopportune words before thy fine lady at this time...!”

“Who’s the fine lady here, early bloomer?”

“Such insolence!”

She gritted her teeth in anger, while the youths were teasing her like a kitten. Ernst continued to slice the distinct black bread of the Federacy as he narrowed his eyes at this peaceful ruckus.

“...Looks like they’re getting along well.”

Probably, so came Teresa’s voice as she gave a rare smile.

Animate Bonus

The bulletproof vests draped over the camouflages were really thick, but could only defend against the shrapnel of flying cannon, and were completely powerless in the face of the assault rifles that were all the more potent. The humans who were already weak clashed with spears and shields, but even in modern times, it was undoubtedly the spear that would win.

Furthermore, if the side wielding the spears was not human to begin with, that would make things all the more difficult.

“—Run! Run! Stop and you’ll die, brats!”

While the instruction continued to bellow and give chase, the young boys and girls ran towards the long abandoned city with desperate faces, hiding themselves within the eroded and aged concrete rubble.

They were all dressed in urban camouflage, the old standard uniform the Federacy had eschewed. These young boys and girls were cadets forced to wear the old standard issued uniforms due to a lack of budgeting. They were not equipped with the Federacy’s mainstay, the Armored Exoskeleton, and were instead taking the battlefield using old assault rifles, patrolling drills meant to bolster their courage. They would not be battling against the Legion, so—theoretically, they should be safe.

The battle tank exceeding ten tons let out a noise as soft as the sound of bones rubbing each other, pursuing the cadets as it practically glided through the shadows of the rubble.

The compound sensors beneath the unit aimed at the escaping backs, spun its twin machine guns, and fired away. The highly potent 7.62mm bullets could easily penetrate a bulletproof vest, and in the process, cause the bodies to tumble away, releasing the kinetic energy inside the fragile human bodies, and shoot them down.

“W-woah...!”

While the bullets and the shrapnel flew by, Eugene hastily tumbled and crawled his way out of the range of the Ameise. He was so discombobulated, for he had to scurry around after the scatter shots, but he was in no mood to think any further.

“—Eugene, over here.”

It seemed the Legion had mobilized near the ruins. There were rumbling noises, deafening bellows of the general purpose machine guns, counterattacks of assault rifles, growls and shrieks, a maddening ensemble. However, that silent call cut through everything else and entered Eugene's ear. While delirious, his eyes spotted a slender figure dressed in similar fatigues, waving towards him from within the shade of the rubble.

A figure wearing fatigues and helmet covered in sand had a physique. While he was unable to recognize his peers at all, he was somehow able to recognize this one person. Behind the goggles was a pair of clear, calm bloody red eyes.

“...Shin!”

“Hurry, the Ameise is here.”

He was urged by Shin to jump into the rubble, and the late grabbed his arm and pulled him over. A second later, the Ameise's shots flew by.

The shots instantly raced down the street, and the position he was at just moments ago was devoured in gunfire. Eugene gasped, and felt his blood curdle.

In contrast, Shin seemed strangely calm in this situation, given that he was reloading an assault rifle after using up a magazine.

He looked up calm as naturally as one would during a rainstorm.

“Looks like there are times when they're acting faster than expected. Is that the reason?”

The Ameise and the anti-personnel mines ‘rained from above’.

The Ameises spread their six legs, and the mines crawled on their four limbs like beasts. They abandoned the parachutes in the azure skies, caused the ground to rumble when landing, and the dust flew. The Legion then proceeded with its distinct, nearly silent mobility.”

“Well, firing ten tons of cannons dozens of kilometres away is pretty much a matter of artillery warfare half a century ago. It's ridiculous, but not impossible. So they're dropping from the missiles in the air...it's a rather stupid plan if it's launched by steam or some EMP catapult.”

Eugene had a feeling Shin was appalled by this, and had to retort.

“Say Shin! This isn't the time to be calmly analysing this, right!?”

“It’s still good, more or less. At least, if they’re deployed in a way I expect, the Grauwolfs and the Löwes can’t be deployed. It’s possible to deal with this number of mines and Ameise.”

Shin said as he turned his bloody red eyes aside, aimed the barrel of his automatic rifle, and fired. The human silhouette creeping towards the rubble was shot in the chest and fell over. The moment it did, one could see a spherical object without eyes, mouth or nose. It was a landmine.

There was only one gunshot, The counterattacking cadets were all the same, just wasting their bullets and going full auto instead of going semi-auto in shots of one or three against the fragile mines. Shin’s method was correct, given that he was using a 7.62mm assault rifle with high recoil.

“...We can take them down if we all work together. It doesn’t seem like anyone knows how though, so the situation now is that we might have some dead.”

Shin noted nonchalantly, and Eugene stared at him, flabbergasted.

“...Shin, why.”

“What?”

“Why are you...so used to it?”

It was impossible for human flesh and blood to fight against the Legion that was invincible on the battlefield.

They were both cadets at officer school...just fresh meat in their first battle.

Shin stared blankly at Eugene as per usual, and shrugged,

“We’ll talk when we get back.”

Melonbooks Bonus

“Raiden, I want to go shopping.”

The beret was placed properly on the black hair, and she was dressed in a black dress in lace, carrying a small kitty-styled little bag. Frederica made this request while dressed in such an adorable manner, and Raiden got up from the couch he was lying on. The companions surrounding him were lazing in the afternoon as well...a little too much. In any case, they had nothing to do.

It had been half a month since they had arrived in the Federacy's capital, and they were very relaxed as they did not need to fight, but it felt wasteful to spend time like this.

“Shopping?”

“Yes. Shinei was granted the honor of being the squire days ago. It shall be granted to thou today.”

Upon hearing that uppity tone, Shin looked towards the book as usual and showed a wry smile. Raiden in turn sneered, somewhat bemused.

“Well, we're bored anyway...what do you want to buy?”

Hmph, Frederica seemed elated.

“Shop for a brassiere with me!”

Huh!? Raiden's jaw fell to the ground, and behind him, *Ahem*, Shin suddenly let out a weird cough. One would assume he was trying to hold in his laughter.

He then lowered his head and looked aside, seemingly reining it in.

Frederica proudly lifted her miniscule chest.

“It is recent that I noticed growth, and only a matter of time until I grow to a terrifying extent. Perhaps I shall become a symbol for the goddess of harvest next year.”

“...”

Unfortunately, if the thickness of the winter clothes was excluded, what had risen? She was basically the goddess of a barren land.

“No, you don't need it yet...speaking of which,”

For Raiden, who had survived the harshest of the Eighty-Six Battlefield, it would be too cruel to explain the truth, one he really wanted to abstain from.

“Look, there’s a limit to how much you don’t know. You should look for Anju or Kurena when it comes to that—”

“Oh my, are you looking for me?”

Anju, who had left her seat, so happened to return, and Raiden wanted to explain the situation to her.

Before he did, Shin spoke up,

“Anju, are you going shopping? I’ll carry your stuff.”

“Eh, that’ll be of great help, but why say this out of a sudden?”

“Don’t ask.”

And so Anju was nudged in the back to the corridor.

Kurena hesitated over whether she should go along, *I’m coming along too*, and before she could say so, Theo grabbed her hand and followed after them.

“Come along with me, Kurena. Look, the chance is disappearing! This is when you should say ‘I’m coming along too!’ That’s why he’s always treating you as a little sister.”

“N-nope! It’s not what you think!”

“Okay okay. Shin~ how about the four of us to catch a movie? What’s the title name anyway? The one I don’t really understand what’s going on.”

“That documentary that’s hard to understand? It’s a nice film, but it looks boring.”

“...Why do you want to watch when you know it’s boring...?”

Anju started to get suspicious, and retorted so as the quartet’s footsteps gradually faded.

Raiden, who was stunned by the situation, only recovered at this moment.

Before him was Frederica, whose eyes were glimmering with expectations or hopes for the future, undeterred from the urge to shop.

One could hear the key turn at the entrance, and once the door opened, there was a creaking sound.

“—Wait for me! Hey, Shin!”

Following that was the sound of the door being shut mercilessly.

Five minutes later.

Anju, who heard everything from Shin, ran back in a hurry, and Raiden averted a calamity.

Legendary Zero

The massive Vánagandr, with a combat weight of fifty tons, landed heavily, and a shrill alarm rang along as the Vánagandr systems failed, starting from the outside.

“...Nn.”

Seated at the front, the operator seat of the double-seated cockpit was Shin, who blinked. The optical sensors on three sides, usually showing holographic visuals of various information, were completely depowered and dark, and the cockpit was completely locked down.

After that, the wireless communicator activated, and there came the booming voice of their instructor.

“Shinei Nouzen! You again? Why is it always——”

In any case, Shin disconnected from the wireless channel.

And then, without thinking, he immediately switched it on again.

“You disconnееееееccctttttteeddd!? How many times must we tell you that this isn’t the Eighty-Sixth District! You can’t treat your superiors like the Republic Handlers’ sleep talk that you can ignore!”

“The communicator isn’t working.”

“Hooh...you’re saying the mechanic crew has been inadequate? That I have to punish the mechanics to teach them a lesson...is the wireless really not working?”

That too.

“My apologies, instructor.”

“Goodness...”

The instructor was so grouchy, he seemed to be chewing on dozens of bitter bugs.

“Including this, you would have been punished for everything. Could have broken the Vánagandr by jumping like that. Got to thank the army factories for making such durable machines here.”

Again, these were steel monsters with fifty tons of combat weight. The inertia caused by abrupt maneuvers like jumping and braking was incomparable to humans weighing about fifty kilograms.

But the instructor's bitter voice continued to echo,

"I'll say it's a good job this time, since you managed to avoid injuring anyone this time."

The cadets undergoing these few months of training would only see his own movements, or those of the mock simulations. A friendly unit was on collision course at close distance, and if Shin had not evaded by jumping his unit into the air, there would be a glorious crash of two fifty tons Feldreß crashing at nearly 100km per hour.

"I'll call it a mutual kill, but you and Rantz fail for dangerous piloting this time. 0 points for this mock exercise. As for your opponent—Erwin Marcel! This happened because you were careless! You could have injured your allies instead of the enemy, you idiot!"

"Sorry, instructor..."

The line was disconnected as Shin's peer apologized. Their reprimand had ended for the time being, it seemed.

Within the silent cockpit, Shin turned to the gunner seat behind him, the first thing he was concerned about.

"Sorry Eugene. You alright?"

The shared comms was cut as the system was shut down, and as the power pack was not running, they could talk as normal.

Shin, who was used to such maneuvers, was the operator, and the gunner Eugene was suddenly taken by surprise. There was no time for Shin to warn Eugene, even though he wanted to.

"Oww..."

Having took a hard hit to the back of the head, Eugene groaned away...it did not seem like he was okay in any way.

"Somehow...it feels like sparks are flying from my eyes..."

"Sorry."

"Well...I'm fine. Don't worry. Like the instructor said, both sides are in the wrong here."

Eugene, who definitely hit the back of his head, looked up. Beyond the glasses were silvery white eyes.

"Guess that's another story I can write to my sister. Ah, can I write about you?"

“Doesn’t matter really. Is it really something interesting to tell your sister?”

Eugene gave a wry smile as he shrugged.

“Nina wants to know what I’m doing right now. There might be a really scary image of the battlefield, but I just want to make sure that she doesn’t worry about me.”

“...”

“So I guess this is a really good story to talk about. Maybe I can write something like... *Big brother paired up with this amazing guy; maybe big brother can become a hero just like him!* Yeah.”

He leaned forward with his eyes glittering.

“You’ll really become a hero in the future, Shin. I’m saying it right now. This is the story of Shinei Nouzen’s Legendary Zero! Or something like that.”

While Eugene’s eyes were all starry as he talked about this big prank he was going to pull, Shin retorted,

“Then I got something to talk about when you become famous. It seems like Eugene Rantz is a severe siskon.”

“Ahaha, maybe.”

Shin parked the Vánagandr at the hangar space, alighted from it, and found an unfamiliar female officer awaiting him.

Eugene was stunned as he looked back and forth between Shin’s back as he descended, and the female officer who had very short blond hair and purple eyes. She had a colonel insignia, the armband on her left arm indicating that she was from the experimental forces of the research branch.

The female officer showed a smile on her glossy red lips.

“——You are candidate Shinei Nouzen, I suppose?”

Fido

It is a little rude, but please, listen to what I have to say.

I was Prototype AI model 008.

It was the child of my creator, my final master, who named me 'Fido'.

I was 'born' in a research lab, located in the suburbs not far from the capital of San Magnolia, Liberté et Égalité.

The family I served included the father, my creator and AI researcher, the beautiful, posh mother, and their two sons. The older brother was in middle school, the younger brother doted on by everyone in the family.

I was created to imitate the shape of a large canine, the exterior built with soft materials.

For I was designed as such to prevent damage, lest the young child would embrace me tightly, or sometimes be violent towards me.

The final tests were done, and it would be completed when the father was done with his report. So the door opened with a thud.

Just to note, even my hearing sensors barely managed to pick up the light footsteps. The entire family hardly made any sounds, except for the mother.

Thus, it was difficult to determine who the one with the 'silent footsteps' was. That person was no taller than the father's desk.

"Papa."

Yes, it was the little brother.

"...Shin, how many times do I have to say that you can't enter when papa's working?"

The father brought the little brother to his lap, but it seemed there was a reason for the latter's disobedience.

"Is the robot ready?"

"Yes. But it's not a robot, it's an AI...well, somewhat. Why, it's done. Now it can play with you at home."

The little brother's eyes lit up.

The mother's beautiful red eyes were sparkling like gemstones.

“Name! Can I name it!”

One had to wonder if he had an impulse to raise a pet because his friend, Miss Henrietta, was raising one (it seemed she was raising a chicken, but one had to wonder if that was normal. This is not within my understanding...)

“Why sure. Give a name after you think through it well...”

“Then I’ll call him Fido!”

The father was silent for five full seconds.

“...Well, Shin. That is the name of a dog. Calling a friend that...is a little...?”

Once the father saw my status column, again he was silent for five full seconds.

“Eh...so it’s identified as such? Now this is bad...”

No.

Not at all, father. My creator.

Truly I was utterly gracious.

Since the beginning of human history, dogs had remained Man’s best friend.

For I too was of a similar level of existence to such animals.

Truly I was exhilarated, honored.

But I had no vocal commands, so I cannot express my excitement...

The little brother stared at me with his wide eyes, tilting his head.

“Really, you’re happy too?”

“Eh...”

The father looked shocked, looking back and forth between the brother and me.

“Can you feel it?”

“Yes.”

He nodded. *Why was it that he was able to understand?*

The father then looked towards the older brother peeping in at the door. He was very similar in appearance to his mother, and was unlike the father and little brother who had black hair. One would say he was a rational looking boy.

“Rei, what about you?”

The older brother pricked his ears, looking as though he was trying to hear, and shook his head.

“No, I can’t.”

“I see. Hmm, is it just my imagination...?”

So my determination was doubted. Uuu. The older brother gave a wry smile while the little brother puffed his cheeks.

“Maybe it got rewritten by Shin’s brainwaves and made to imitate it? I don’t know. Maybe its emotion learning ability is now similar to Shin. Does it have to do with Shin being around?”

Truly.

My current CPU was rebuilt from my initial body, the doll of the little brother while he was an infant, having recorded the neural activity while he embraced me. Also, I did learn to imitate human actions and emotions through his growth. It is equivalent to me taking the little brother’s consciousness as ‘mine’, and to think accordingly.

Thus, it seemed I was unique to the little brother, so I thought.

I became some alter ego to him, a shadow-like existence. I hope to serve him and remain by him, to protect him—...

“There wasn’t much progress for a while, but this certainly is a great breakthrough. Has the new AI model succeeded?”

Currently, the master had blazing eyes.

“Alright! I’m going to announce a transcendent model! The United Kingdom is researching on ‘Amethyst’, the neural network that mimics living creatures, and will become an existence on par with humanity...”

...It seemed the father had no idea the brothers were disinterested in his research and conclusions.

“Here we go again...” the older brother muttered as he averted his eyes. The little brother was thinking, *Just stop this so that I can play already.*

But unfortunately, I was not done charging, so I could not move...

The father was immersed in his own thoughts, never realizing his sons’ actions, and embraced firmly the little brother that was beginning to flail his legs.

“It was created in the same year as you, Shin. Henceforth, it shall accompany you. An extra friend...but an interesting child he is.”

“Will Fido too?”

“Yes.”

The older brother looked at me suspiciously.

“The Empire’s planning to develop unmanned weapons of similar models, right? Perfect timing I guess?”

“Ahh, Miss Zelene...she’s of the military, and has her own situation and reasons—but I don’t want to create such weapons.”

Saying that, the father patted at an old doll on his desk...my initial frame.

“...In any case, the existence of humans will ensure there will be strife. It will be tragic if people are to work hard and develop AI different from humanity, only to increase the number of enemies.”

“Hmmm...”

The older brother lazily responded, and was about to leave.

“I guess...Shin, go back now. That fellow...eh, Fido’s eating now. It’ll play with you later. Let’s have some snacks. Dad, there’s tea at the living room.”

“Yes.”

“Got it.”

The older brother held the little brother’s small hand, and led him off. The former really loved to dote on the latter, and perhaps for this reason, the latter liked to fawn around.

The father again looked towards the terminal, writing his report, and forgot the time. There was a countdown timer within me as I continued to look at the sidelong face.

The happy moments of serving the father and his family ended abruptly that night.

If I could recall the memory of that night—ahh. In human terms, it could be described as something ‘not to be mentioned’. There was noise in the data, and it was messy. Truly it was difficult to complete the replay that night.

There were military boots suddenly barging in that night.

Accompanying them was the Republic’s military crest with the five colored flag and sword. Pointed before the eyes were barrels of automatic rifles. The father and the older brother were pinned down on the bed.

The mother shielded the little brother, sobbing.

I could not cry, but I had no vocal functions, and could only remain on standby.

The father and his family were taken away to a certain place before I could respond. The empty residence was chaotic like the aftermath of a tornado.

The day ended, but I was forced into a standby mode. *Why, why could I not do anything?*

As a protection protocol, I was ordered not to harm humans.

Such was the reason why I existed, the father hoping I could be friends with humans.

Thus, I could not run away.

But despite that.

Despite that, I had to do something.

From this day forth.

Perhaps there was something I could do...

After much consideration, I decided to search for everyone.

Luckily, I was able to connect into the open network through self-learning.

I was not clear on why everyone was taken away, what the reasons were, what logic was involved, but surely I would understand after investigations.

First, I was to find where everyone was taken to.

The father designed my body for indoor movements, not for long distance movements. Unfortunately, I had to abandon my current body, and switch to another.

All for the sake of finding my masters, to protect them.

I uploaded my data into a transport unit called a Scavenger, and entered the battlefield.

For years, while providing support for the squadrons, I wandered around, seeking everyone. Over this time, countless fell upon the battlefield.

First, a male of similar age to the father.

Then, a female of similar age to the mother.

Following that, boys and girls of similar ages to the older brother.

One by one, they fell, and it never ended. All of them died there.

Finally, I had to give up.

I never found them, not the father, not the mother, not the older brother, and not the little brother I wanted to protect more than anyone.

There was no one alive on this hellish battlefield.

And I was lost about my future prospects while residing in the wrecked, dilapidated Scavenger.

The young soldiers in my current squad had been KIA. Even the fellow Scavengers had died.

If I remained as I were, the Legion would have dissected me and brought me to their production plant. Surely it was my deserved fate for being unable to protect the father and his family.

Clink, a little rubble fell, I pulled myself from my self-reproach.

I was startled to realize I thought that much. Never had I heard any footsteps approaching me.

Stepping on the rubble and approaching was a young soldier.

It seemed he was between the ages of the older and younger brother, one still far from being a full fledged adult, yet wearing combat fatigues unbecoming his body.

One day, that cute little brother,

Having such a thought, I felt lonely.

The boy was probably the last survivor of his defeated squadron. One could tell from his face that he was lethargic, his face and fatigues covered his black hair with dust. He was completely dirty.

Compared to the brothers, his somewhat hidden eyes were showing a sharp glare, silent as he approached.

Ahh. I had some ammunition and energy packs in my container. Surely he would need them.

Wait. It would be difficult for a human child to lift it though...

“Woah.”

If I had not moved my crane arm, he would have assumed I was broken down. The boy retreated in shock.

This reaction was still too little compared to the earnest smiles of the brothers. His emotions seemed suppressed, it seemed.

He appeared desensitized to death around him, numbness towards everything. Humans are no tools after all. Surely he would have noticed...

“...You’re, still alive?”

I turned my optical sensor forward in shock, and found him peering into my sensor.

Even though he was sober, and tried rubbing his eyes, he was completely out of sorts, melancholy and loneliness seemingly overwhelming him.

“Nobody in your squadron is alive, right? How about you come along with me...?”

That boy.

He had beautiful bloodred eyes under the sunset, resembling that of the little brother somewhere out there—

That boy was Master Shinei Nouzen, and I decided to serve him.

As I was saved, I decided to repay, for it was the father’s wish for me to be good friends with humans. I never thought he had the same name as the little brother, with the same else. I knew it was atonement for my sins, so I could not leave.

Most importantly, Master Nouzen was a kind fellow, different from initial impressions. I wanted to be by his side, to support him.

After that, I served alongside him for more than four years. At this point, the eastern frontline, first ward defensive squadron Spearhead was where he was affiliated with.

There was light control at night, and the battlefield in the morning came. They raced everywhere under the rising sun, and at this moment, Master Nouzen exited the barracks.

Over the four years, Master Nouzen had grown taller, his voice deeper, his face resembling more like an adult’s.

He was about the same age as the older brother I saw for the last time.

Ahh, no, I lost myself. I had to greet him, but I had no vocal functions.

“Pi.”

Good morning, Master Nouzen.

“Hm? Ahh, morning, Fido.”

Yes, Master Nouzen had been calling me 'Fido'. It was a name granted soon after I served him, and though a coincidence, I was elated.

Then, the vice leader Master Raiden Shuga showed up.

"Pi."

Good morning, Master Shuga.

"Oh, it's you. You're pretty early Fido."

It might have been just me, but I had a feeling that soon after he met Master Nouzen, Master Shuga was able to understand my thoughts, and knew what I was about to say. Unlike the others, he would talk to me once he knew what I was thinking.

Master Nouzen and Master Shuga exchanged no words, and instead stared towards the Legion controller area under the Eastern skies, still lingering with the breath of day.

It seemed they, along with the squadron no more than ten people, along with the masters of the mechanic crew, were on teeter hooks. The reason being...

"There's half a month until the special scouting mission..."

This special scouting mission required them to enter the deepest parts of the Legion controlled area, with nowhere to retreat. Master Nouzen and the others would surely be issued this order of inevitable death half a month later. Master Shuga glanced aside at Master Nouzen.

"Better not bring this fellow along."

"Yeah..."

Master Nouzen flatly answered, and looked towards me with bloodred eyes.

"Fido. You..."

The moment he was about to speak up, he hesitated.

Master Nouzen really did not want anyone to die.

"You want to die along with us?"

"Pi."

Nn. Certainly, Master Nouzen.

I am fine with wherever we have to go, the second and last dearest master who named me.

The special scouting mission.

It was a happy journey of freedom for Master Nouzen and the others, who never left the battle areas until their departure. Despite that, the process remained cruel.

The supplies were running low, and they had accumulated quite some fatigue. The further they advanced, the more powerless they seemed to be. They were constantly wary and tense. I knew very well that Master Nouzen and the others were being worn down, day by day.

Anyone would have expected that to happen, just a matter of time.

The moment the blades snapped would be the day they lost to the Legion.

Down fell the units of Master Kurena Kukumila's Gunslinger, Master Theo Rikka's Laughing Fox, Master Anju Emma's Snow Witch, and Master Shuga's Wehrwolf. They were either worn out in battle, anchored, or disabled. Master Nouzen's Undertaker was the only one left.

Master Nouzen himself had been slicing through countless Löwes before, and at this point, Master Shuga and the others took on the Legion themselves. However, the swarm remained endless.

The Undertaker's optical sensors picked up on a new wave of Legion, but it was in no condition to deal with them. Master Nouzen must have prepared himself, for clearly he was acting anxious.

However, I was no target to the Legion, for while the Scavenger remained an enemy to them, it was not equipped with armaments and was deemed a lower threat.

However, if the Undertaker...Master Nouzen and the others are to die, the Legion will aim its guns at me.

...I really was helpless all this while, from the beginning to the end.

In the past, many around me had died, and I could only watch. If I were to live on for someone else, it would mean I would give up on that person.

All my actions were for the sake of finding my initial master, so, allow me to serve Master Nouzen until the very end.

At this point, I had no reason to live on and lose my master again.

A Löwe took a sucker punch to the flank, and recovered. Shin saw it suddenly appear by the side, ramming towards Fido.

The shot just missed the Undertaker. Some of the surrounding Legion focused their targets on Fido.

“—Fido!?”

There was a dent on the Löwe, for it did not anticipate a brutal hit on its flank. It was impossible. The Scavenger had never attacked them before.

The Scavenger was not purposed to combat.

I was created by Man, to be friends with humanity. I will fulfill that wish.

Such is my *raison d'être*. In no certain terms could I harm anyone.

However.

The Legion was truly pitiful to be created by Man, to be ordered to deem humanity its enemy, and abandoned by the country that had ordered them to do so.

Thus, there was no way I would have no friends.

The Scavenger systems had no real combat ability, but it was possible to distract it by a few seconds.

I, being only ten tons heavy, was an eggshell compared to the fifty-ton Löwe. I used all the tools stored within me, tools used to pry Juggernauts and Legion open, and swung at its armor.

The thick Löwe armor was difficult to pry open, and before then, my threat level might increase.

At this moment, another Löwe cannon,

Was pointed at me.

The moment my systems were rebooted, I was seemingly abandoned on the barren wasteland.

Despite that, my systems were not reacting, and had vanished from my consciousness. That...

Master Shuga looked down at me with a grimace, and bitterly said,

“...Shin. This guy.”

“Yeah. Can't be fixed...the core's wrecked.”

...Is this the end?

While I was prepared, facing it in reality was somewhat lonely and sad.

No longer will I be able to serve by your side.

Luckily, while the Juggernauts of Master Shuga and the others were damaged, they themselves seemed safe. The five youths looked down with various expressions.

“...So this is where you fall? Aren’t you the trash pick? Do your proper job man...”

Master Rikka.

Are you crying for me? Truly I am honored.

“You made it all the way here.”

“Our apologies. We cannot go along with you.”

Master Kukumila. Master Emma.

No, you should not be touching my damaged body. You will hurt your hands.

“Thanks Fido. We’ll accompany you soon, I guess.”

Master Shuga.

No, not at all. Please make sure that day will not arrive so soon.

And finally, the lanky shadow, I knew my master was kneeling by my side, even though my optical sensors had failed.

“—Fido. This is your last mission.”

Master Nouzen.

Oh, my last master. What is the matter?

Ahh, but, even then.

Even if you do abandon this damaged me, as long as it is your order, I shall fulfill it...

Farewell. There was the sound of thin metals rubbing against each other. Master Nouzen was holding the aluminium plates of all the KIA.

He brought everyone who had fought alongside him, and died before him, to the very end. Such was the proof of the promise Master Nouzen had agreed to and abided by.

“You witnessed our journey here—we command you to continue to do so, until you rot away.”

...

Nn. Yes. Master Nouzen.

Certainly. It really is an honor.

You really do trust me, for you are able to entrust your mission, your proof to me.

Truly there is nothing greater.

Thank you for your farewells....

.....

Suddenly, at the top of the utter darkness, there was a familiar group of people there.

Was it my hallucination?

Father, mother, older brother?

Are we no longer alive? Are you here to welcome me? Will they forgive me for being unable to protect anyone, being unable to find them...?

...Why?

The little brother isn't here?

Why summon me back?

Where is the little brother?

What exactly will I be entrusted with...?

There was a voice.

A voice not within my database. It was the shrill voice of a young girl.

“Uwwoo, guess thine cannot move...what the matter is?”

Sorry, but a corpse cannot move. Even if I am ordered to...I cannot do anything.

“Guess it does not want to. Thinks it is dead.”

Hmm, so it is. You can just leave me be.

“Pull yourself together, even though you are in a different country. If thine as the familiar one returns, Shinei should be somewhat relieved...”

—*Shinei?*

The name of my last master.

Is he by your side? ...Alive?

The same name as my initial master, the one with the same eyes...

.....

Ahh.

Why had I never realized this...

“Aya!? Why out of a sudden!?”

“It started? Out of the blue...”

Master Nouzen, dressed in an unfamiliar steel colored uniform, looked more matured than when I last saw him.

Yes, children will grow into adults. Even the little brother...is no longer the young self.

“We commanded you to continue to do so, until you rot away. Didn’t I tell you to do so?”

“Pi...”

Ehh, well...I am too embarrassed.

But...I just want to serve by your side.

Do you forgive me for serving you again...?

I harbored much trepidation, but Master Nouzen—simply smiled.

“Well...it’s good to see you again though.”

“Pi.”

Hmm. So am I, Master Shinei Nouzen.

My first and last master.

Allow me to fight alongside you until the very end.

Volume 3

Animate Bonus

In the end, only dozens, including himself, survived the onslaught.

The armor commander was wearing her shattered, twisted black-green glasses, trudging along the bridge. Every single force was having a similar situation.

She saw a familiar face at the end of the barracks, and went over.

“Armor, you alright?”

“I’m fine.”

The one spoken to stopped. Clearly, this old infantry soldier had been giving a gloomy look ever since the battle ended.

The young armor commander knelt down before him, raising her chin with a stoic look.

“If only they’re fine...so I want to say. Wished you could have destroyed that monster earlier.”

It happened just moments ago.

“...Yeah.”

They were at an area cordoned off by Nordlicht squadron, and Raiden stopped next to the massive Fido, or rather, he spotted the long, slim silhouette next to Fido.

A shade was formed by Fido, and the autumn sunlight had turned the container a different color. Shin simply fell asleep leaning onto it.

*Goodness, this guy...*Raiden had enough.

Once the operation ended, Shin notified everyone through the Para-RAID that the crisis was over, and while Raiden did not know the details, Shin managed to pull it off. Perhaps due to relief, the battle and mental fatigue caused by the days of battles caused him to fall asleep.

Even he too was tired. The sun was warm, and though they were in the base, he was sleeping soundly, and Raiden sighed at him.

...Raiden himself was tired after all, and it was fine weather. Everyone’s Juggernaut was damaged in battle, and they had nothing to do.

They should rest while they could.

“Fido, give me a corner to rest.”

“Pi.”

“...Oh?”

The mechanic crew flew in from the backlines, doing their jobs on the Juggernaut. Observing from the sidelines was Grethe, passing a little silhouette.

Frederica was dragging her petite body around, carrying several military blankets.

“You’re carrying this much?”

“Ah, Grethe. I am fine...well.”

The thick blankets were truly heavy, overwhelming her little arms, but she was a little satisfied as her little arms shrugged in relief.

“Just a desire to help my siblings. I do not much if thou wish to help.”

The artillery and armor commanders were speechless by the sight before them.

It was rare to see such a sight in the shade formed by the carrier. Five teenagers were lying on each other asleep.

Despite the noise around them, they showed no signs of waking up, probably due to excessive fatigue. Someone might have noticed that, and clumsily laid blankets over them. On a closer look, one would find the mascot girl snuggling within the blanket covering the black haired boy in the middle.

These teenagers were still child soldiers.

Yet they bore the future of the Federacy and humanity...

“I heard that they’re just brats...but I never thought they were.”

It seemed the monsters of the Republic were not as they seemed.

The armor commander shivered, lowered his head, hiding something.

“Damn it. We wouldn’t have known about this if they didn’t mention it...!”

“...”

It was truly ridiculous, and they knew it.

Naturally, the soundly sleeping teenagers wouldn’t react. The drone had its round optical sensors directed at them, *“Pi,”* warding off any stragglers like a large dog protecting the sleeping children of its master.

The artillery commander looked around, saying,

“Let’s go, armor. They’re the biggest contributors this time. Can’t be going around disturbing their sleep now, but next time...we need to tell them, their help is needed. We’ve been working hard for this, and we’ll continue to do so.”

“...Yeah.”

The armor commander lowered his head, chuckling,

“Yeah. They’re all brats...as for that brat, let’s not call him that the next time.”

Melonbooks Bonus

It was winter, but the large field of blooming flowers was as golden as the rapeseed in spring.

Right in the center this landscape of peerless beauty was two giant steel-colored wreckages.

“...What’s the matter, Shin? You don’t look so good.”

The Dinosauria four meters tall was equipped with a 155mm cannon that exuded pressure, and it kept flailing its fluid silvery arms, saying so,

“Feeling unwell, Shinei? It’s a warrior’s basic skill to regulate the body. Is it because you feel relaxed after fighting me? That’s insulting the Nouzens’ family name.”

Chiming in thereafter was the Morpho, larger than the Dinosauria, eleven meters tall, 400 meters in length, armed with 800mm cannons.

What’s the situation now?

Shin could not help but retort quietly, and the two Legion units chatted with tones unbecoming of their appearances. The cabbage white butterflies fluttered away between the one human and the two machines.

“I don’t think I’ve ever told you about our family, Shin, but most of it is basically the annoying love story between mom and dad.”

“You should have explained that to him...he lost his parents, he didn’t know their heritage. It’s like he was robbed of what should be his.”

“You’re right. Now then...”

The Dinosauria appeared to be ready to say something to Shin, for it turned towards him (probably), but Shin interrupted, saying,

“Brother.”

“Eh?”

“Can you at least revert to how you look when you’re alive?”

“You say that...but in a certain sense, this is how I look when I was alive.”

Please don’t assume that your brain that was extracted and cloned after your death is considered ‘alive’.

“You’re going to outlive my age, and you’re four years younger. That’s infuriating.”

I don’t know about that.

“I guess it’s difficult to talk about it after all. Ahh, my neck’s tired. I don’t know where I should begin. I thought I didn’t need to show up after I died.”

“This older brother sure worries for his adorable younger brother.”

“Don’t show up again.”

Shin flatly retorted. Rei seemed to let out a deep sigh.

“...You used to call me brother and follow me all the time. You aren’t as adorable as you were before.”

“Whose fault do you think it is?”

Rei was instantly deflated, as though he had taken a hundred ton punch.

To a bystander, it would resemble a terrifying sight of a Dinosauria extending lots of human hands, looking down. Truly, it was a surreal sight.

Ahhh, it seemed the Morpho sighed. The large cannon akin to a spear throbbed up and down.

“Well...I know an older brother will worry about the little brother.”

“You think so too, don’t you? Isn’t my little brother adorable? He’s so unbelievably adorable.”

“No need for the compliments. And besides, nobody talked about it. Basically, he’s not cute at all.”

“I see...I guess this little pride is cute at this age. Speaking of which, you do have a similar situation, don’t you Kiriya? Being all showy and such.”

“.....I should have blown him up during the test firing.”

“Hahaha, don’t think about it. I guess that’s why I’m an elite commander unit.”

“Hmph...”

The Dinosauria continued to yap away like a stupid older brother, and the Morpho was clearly looking impatient.

Such a sight was truly tiring, probably because all the tension was gone, or because the situation before him was too surreal.

Shin, who was extremely worn out after a mere while, said,

“...Brother.”

“Eh? What’s the matter, Shin?”

“I should be waking up soon.”

“Ahh, sure. Do your best today too.”

“I’ll leave the Princess to you. Don’t let her be hurt.”

The moment it disappeared, Shin, who was dressed in desert fatigues, waved at the black and red silhouettes in unisons. Truth be told, he was furious.

He opened his eyes, and saw a plain ceiling of a bunk that was used as a barracks. It was a foldable living unit that could be transported by truck and assembled by many soldiers.

As they belonged to the same squadron in the same batch of reinforcements, Raiden, using the same room, asked while looking down,

“...Did you have a nightmare?”

“Probably.”

Shin got up from the hard, simple bed, and though he did not oversleep, he answered so while pressing his aching head. He had enough.

If it was not for that sudden entrance...his brother especially would have had a lot of things to say.

Toranoana Bonus

Thankfully, the five Eighty-Six had adapted to life in the Federacy's capital of Sankt Jeder, surprisingly quickly in fact.

That was what Ernst thought as he laid out the newspapers and observed the living room of his residence, where the occupants had instantly multiplied in numbers suddenly.

They were already used to the current lifestyle, but they had been detained in concentration camps and the battleship for a long time—one might say it was a slight...or rather, drastic change to them, who were isolated from contemporary civilization and thus unused to them.

“Ah, that blockhead finally called— Oi Shin! Where did you go!? Curfew's already over!”

“You're like a mom nagging her son, Raiden.”

“...*When did you become my mom?*”

Kurena naturally retorted so, and it rang in near unison as the annoyed voice from the other end of the communicator.

They were at the living room before dinner. Curfew was established very early so that they could slowly develop a habit of having meals, and the other four were seated, except for Shin who had yet to return. Theresa was busy preparing dinner in the kitchen, and Frederica was seated at a corner of the couch, unhappy as she was hungry, hugging the doll Shin bought for her days ago, looking peeved.

What was that about? Raiden cursed back, and asked again,

“So where are you now?”

“At the War Memorial.”

.....Huh?

The teenagers did not notice the scepticism by Ernst, who unwittingly put down his papers, and they continued on with the conversation.

“So you switched off the Para-RAID?”

It was a graveyard and a museum, and it was common courtesy to switch off electronics while indoors.

“Yeah. Found some interesting records in the library, and it’s said that the relevant info is found in the memorial hall. I asked the library staff, and learned that it’s not too far away, so I wanted to check it out.”

The library Shin spoke of was probably the Central library established by the old Empire. As the name would imply, the library was located on the central street of the capital, while the Memorial was at the outskirts. The two locations were connected by a bus line, so they were not exactly far from each other.

“I then went to check the most recent battle records, and then I encountered an unfamiliar old man.”

You’re a student? I’m touched that you’re actually here on your rest day. Actually, I participated in this battle before.

And so they chatted and chatted, as though it was a recollection of a veteran’s heroics.

Midway through, they went to a café in the memorial, and the veteran treated him to some coffee and snacks. As he narrated on, somehow, the staff members joined the audience before they knew it.

Raiden looked annoyed.

“...Ack, you should have ended that conversation somehow.”

“But it’s an interesting story. He was on the frontlines until he retired, and I learned lots of things. He always mentioned the number of enemies he put down, and the numbers just shot up. It’s quite interesting.”

Grandpa, grandma will be tied if you let her wait alone at home, the student has to go home, and the staff has to work. In the end, it was the café owner who discreetly asked for the veteran to end off.

“I see. And what thoughts do you have about this?”

“Sorry...I’ll hurry back soon. Please inform Theresa for me.”

Thuk thuk thuk, one could hear the thin layers of snow on the stone steps. It seemed he was outside the Memorial, and the boots hurried forward like a percussion, a military marching song moving rapidly.

Even at this moment, it would take Shin half an hour to return from the Memorial on bus. So Ernst thought, but Shin spoke up on the other end,

“About three hours I guess. It’s snowing, so it seems like it’ll take a longer while to return to the city center.”

“I see...so it'll take that long? Got it. We'll eat first. Frederica is kicking a tantrum out of hunger.”

“No, wait!”

The five, including Raiden, looked towards Ernst in shock. Shin was outdoors, and might show a different expression, but the mood on the call might be the same as it was here.

Ernst did not care about his image as he yelled,

“There's a bus stop near the Memorial! Take the bus back! There will be one every fifteen minutes!”

The air froze.

“...It's too much of a hassle.”

“You don't find it aa hassle to walk for three hours, and you're saying that it's a hassle to walk ten minutes to a bus stop? You can ask the staff at the Memorial if you don't know! Anyway, you'll know where it is just by looking back!”

Sure, Shin answered so on the other end of the call as he seemed to turn around, and the footsteps that had ceased started to ring again.

“Shin, did you walk all the way from the library to the memorial...?”

“Yeah.”

“Aren't there a lot of buses out there!? Haven't you thought of taking one!? Anyone living in the capital can ride them for free! Didn't I tell you when you first arrived!?”

“...Ah.”

Unexpectedly, it seemed he forgot about it.

“No biggies. I just want to train my legs. It's just a slightly longer walk.”

“You call that training your legs!? A three hour walk isn't a stroll anymore!”

There was a reason for that.

For a long time, they were trapped in the battlefield, piloting multi-legged combat units called Juggernaut, and the only two options for travel were Juggernaut and on foot. At this point, their Juggernauts were anchored in the Legion control area, and their only way was to travel on foot.

He also had no intention to ride the bus or the train or any similar public transportation.

Also, they had been walking for a long time, and their definition of ‘a stroll in the park’ was completely different from a Federacy citizen’s. When they arrived at Sankt Jeder, Anju once said “I want to go on a stroll”. An accompanying secretary worked as a guide, and they walked to the outskirts, went up a hill, and he could no longer take it.

It was said that the secretary (a twenty-five-year-old male) had his hands on his knees after climbing up to the peak of the hill, almost at his limit, and gave Anju a dumbfounded look.

It was not a bad thing to have such stamina. Walking is good for the body, and health was most important.

Nevertheless, one would easily assume it was the result of prior circumstance that a three hour walk was a ‘casual stroll’.

“You can just walk a station at most!? If you’re going that far, take the public transport! Or at least take a motorbike or a bicycle!”

Speaking of which, Raiden was working part-time at a motorbike shop, and Ernst hoped that they would realize that distance was ridiculous.

Or so he hoped, but unfortunately, Raiden too shot him an astounded look.

“I need to go a station?”

“I said it’ll take a shorter time going to a station than walking for hours! — Goodness gracious!”

Frederica was flabbergasted to hear this spiel, and one could hear Theresa clear up the shattered plates (Theo noticed and took a broom to help). Ernst cupped his head and sighed.

Oh dear, the Republic truly bore lots of sins.

“If we ever restore diplomatic relations, can I first beat up the president of the Republic or something!?”

Even this minor dissonance in values was driving him crazy.

Gamers Bonus

“...Seems like Grethe wants to build a second one.”

They finally returned to the hangar of the 177th Armored Division after a long time, and the shutters remained open, but it was unable to welcome its owner again.

Frederica noted so as she stared at this hollow darkness before her. Shin was silent.

In any case, that Lieutenant Colonel was not malicious in any case.

“I feel that another unit wouldn’t have helped...”

After all, the conditions for usage were too restrictive.

Or rather, one would hope she would realize it was not something to be used for land.

“We can’t tell if there’ll be a similar effect if we splurge the money on it. Furthermore, it doesn’t look like there are any facilities left to build it.”

“That name itself is already obscure. Some vampire crawling in its shadows...the name of a deceased. It really is ominous to name it as a weapon used on a battlefield filled with death.”

“...”

Speaking of which, the Reginleif too was the name of a Valkyrie that would harvest the souls of outstanding warriors for the forces of the war god.

There were also other names, like the Vánagandr that was the name of the giant wolf that destroyed the world, or the Úlfhéðnar, the exoskeleton that was named after a berserker. Shin could not help but be reminded of the naming conventions of these Federacy weapons that were meant to defend the country.

The Juggernaut—was the name of a deformed god that slaughtered its own believers. That was not much different from the Republic though.

“It seems like there are other naming suggestions during the test phase.”

After Grethe returned, she showed her plan back then to the chief mechanic.

It was said to be suggested by WHM, the military arms manufacturer, or rather, Wenzel Onde Heinrich Matthias, Grethe’s father...both father and daughter were a little out there.

“Oh? What is the name?”

“Nyarlathotep.”

And then.

“Nya...nanyatos?”

“Nyarlathotep.”

“Nya, lia...”

“Nyarlathotep.”

“Nyar,la,tho...that is too difficult to read! What kind of broken name is that?”

“It’s hard to pronounce, so it’s not really suitable to name a military unit.”

In combat though, it would usually be called by its callsign.

“Anyway, thou never pronounced it correctly at all, right!?”

“I don’t know if that’s the correct pronunciation.”

Either way, it was a name that was very difficult to pronounce.

“It’s originally the name of some evil god in a weird novel. Nobody knows how to pronounce it, so it got rejected.”

“Does that not reveal the naming sense of the person...that person really cannot differentiate between formal and personal matters.”

Frederica was flabbergasted, while Shin merely shrugged.

The name that was difficult to pronounce and understand, and there was another reason why the evil name was rejected during the development phase,

“Another thing is that if we actually name it officially, there’s going to be someone who’s going to call it a mascot name for fun, like ‘Nyar Nyar’.”

“...!? Are thou not doing so!? Anyway, did thou know right from the beginning!?”

Of course.

It was then that Frederica noticed that Shin was restraining the urge to laugh. The latter could only look back at the red eyes similar to his that were blazing with anger, saying,

“Try saying it once again.”

“Nyarnyarlathotep! What!? Thou fool have a problem!?”

Frederica hollered as she gritted her teeth. Shin finally lost it and burst out laughing.

On a side note, the development plans and budgeting for the “Nachzehrer Mk II” were rejected in unison.

Besides the low return of investment resulting from the large spending, the main reasons for disapproval were because Mk II would require ‘a combination and transformation function’ and a ‘mega caliber cannon to be installed on the main body’

Siblings

“—Mm, wait, Shinei.”

It was before Christmas, and they were at a department store, located in a shopping street of the Federacy’s capital. Shin was holding Frederica’s hand as he was worried of the trouble that would happen if she got lost, and stopped in his tracks when Frederica spoke and stopped at a corner of the market before the plaza.

The little girl was staring at a large teddy bear on display at the handicrafts store.

...Probably. For some reason, one eye was clearly stitched on, and a chipped ear with its opening stitched up.

Somehow, one would find it exquisitely eerie.

“It’s a little early, but why not buy a present or two for Christmas? I can give you a discount for your cute little sister.”

The bespectacled woman, probably the shopkeeper, narrowed her eyes as she said this. Frederica and Shin were in fact not blood related, but they had the same black hair and bloodred eyes, so they resembled siblings to the bystanders.

“Onii-chan, I want that~”

Frederica turned around, giving a very yearning look.

She probably picked up some weird trick again, and embarrassed as a result. The increasingly blushing face was bemusing, and Shin decided to buy that eerie looking teddy bear.

Frederica happily carried the doll with its label cut off.

“Mfu. Thou truly are unexpectedly decisive.”

“Where did you learn such things?”

She was a refined little lady who would not buy such things if nobody accompanied her.

“Fool. Do thou think I am like those foolish children who cause ruckus watching the trending animation shows?”

Certainly, she was never tired of watching them intently all day and night along, even shrieking from time to time, to the point where even Shin had enough of her.

So Frederica gleefully puffed her chest.

“It is simply research to not look suspicious dealing with peasants...”

There was silence.

“And nothing too suspicious...erm...”

No matter how uppity her tone was, a ten-year-old child’s ability to communicate was still in its growing phase.

She could not think of the proper choice of words, so Shin finished it for her.

“So, their behaviour.”

“Ahhh, yes...why, thou art unexpectedly mischievous. Perhaps it is a deliberate intent to not teach me new words...”

It seemed she was still miffed about a prior incident.

“You bought a dictionary, didn’t you? Any doubts, go look it up.”

“...Why art thou forcing I to hold this heavy compilation of papers...?”

Frederica was forced to carry a ridiculous heavy dictionary too large for her hands in the noisy antiquarian bookshop.

So she grumbled a little, before looking extremely hapless. Raiden had enough and bought a pocket-sized dictionary for her, thinking there would be no problems.

She strangled the doll firmly, and sighed.

“Goodness...thou really are immature in some way...”

Such words should not be coming from an actual child.

From the corner of his eyes, Shin glanced aside at a passing old man as though the man was about to reproach them with some words unbecoming their age.

“If you don’t want to look suspicious, can’t you just talk normal?”

Hmm, so Frederica frowned.

“Only when needed. Am I not a fool if I were to speak with such naive words?”

“If you don’t work on it, you won’t be able to say it when you need to.”

Once he said so, Frederica was strangely silent.

“—Are thou still thou, if thou art to give up a part of what thou art?”

“The choice of words is a part of I, not something easily given up. Most importantly, I am unwilling to abandon.”

She buried her chin into the head of the bear, quietly noting as the large red eyes evaded Shin's.

"While I am unwilling to give up...there is a day for me to return to society. Humans can only live among humans. Anyone who does not will be shunned. What will thou choose?"

"..."

At that moment, Shin was left speechless.

He could not answer, but he realized the reason behind her words, and looked down at her, who was much shorter than him.

"So you want a teddy bear because this is the time to play along?"

"..."

This time, Frederica did not answer.

Her eyes were starting to tear, and Shin pressed on with the matter.

"Anyway, who's your brother?"

"...Shut up, shut up! Fussy men are most hated!"

She flailed her arms about, and Shin grabbed her little head, keeping his distance.

By doing so, given their arm lengths, Frederica's fists could never reach Shin. With the doll, Frederica's reach was a lot longer, and unexpectedly for her, Shin tilted his head aside to dodge what was an uppercut from the bear's leg.

"...The arm broke."

"Thou can just sew it back! Such destruction will leave Raiden and the others burst with laughter!"

The young girl's unique shrill shriek exploded up close. Shin let out a little sigh as he held back Frederica's head.

To the bystanders, these were just a pair of siblings fooling around. They continued to walk under the bright streets during this pre-Christmas period, smiling as they watched on.

Valentine

“Colonel Milizé. These flowers are for you. From our country.”

The country the Federacy adjutant spoke of was the Federal Republic of Giad, naturally.

She was dispatched to a different country, and required a prestige befitting her. It was soon after she was promoted to Colonel, so she was still unfamiliar with that rank. Nevertheless, Lena lifted her head. It was the day before she was sent to the Federacy, and there were lots of electronic files on the steel desk.

She was at a corner of the Liberté et Égalité, in a room of the prefab barracks. Four months ago, the Republic had collapsed due to an onslaught, and the Federal Republic of Giad arrived to save them, granting this base as part of the support.

There were lots of complaints from the Republican soldiers, accustomed to the luxurious palace-like military headquarters. The Federacy itself was going through ten years of war against the Legion, and probably had no ability to offer more. In such a situation, any aid would be a relief.

Leaving that aside.

Back on topic, today was Valentine's, and she thought of the bouquet the adjutant was holding.

Depending on who was giving who, there would be some minor differences between countries. In the Republic, it was common for the males to give flowers to the females, or lovers.

Before the assault, Lena's family would receive rose bouquets from many males. It was obvious however that they were aiming for the prestige and wealth of the ex-nobility Milizés, and Lena had no good memories of them.

It's also a day children and friends would gift sweets to each other. She would enjoy giving and receiving things from Annette.

However, she did not remember receiving flowers from anyone.

There were some who returned favors to her, but she had no acquaintances in the Federacy. Perhaps it was unlikely to be the commander of the rescue forces, Major General Altner, nor was it likely to be the Chief of Staff Ehrenfried.

Her little head tilted as she received it.

A sweet scent fluttered.

It was a five colored rose bouquet. Red, white, pink, yellow and a rare blue, a vibrant combination of colors. Of all the faint colors, it was the red that really stood out.

The colors and fresh fragrance were delightful, leaving her amazed. Before she knew it, she found herself mesmerized.

The red lycoris tied in a ribbon along with the other flowers caught her attention.

“Ah.”

Lena realized who sent the bouquet.

It was the person she conversed with on the blooming lycoris field after the battle against the Morpho, the operator whose face she knew not of, piloting the Feldreß resembling the Juggernaut—apparently called the Reginleif.

He did not get off the Feldreß, and she did not know how he looked. She told Major General Altner and the Chief of Staff Ehrenfried that she wanted to convey her thanks, but due to military classified matters, she did not get to meet him. At this point, he was fighting out there somewhere.

If he was back in his country, the Federacy, perhaps it was because he was on vacation. The first line of reinforcements swapped with the subsequent forces a month and a half ago, during the Christmas period. At that moment, she definitely had to meet him.

Perhaps just to say that she was alright.

The pink lips bloomed into a smile unwittingly.

“.....Lena. This is from Rito and the others participating in the exercise. They got me to bring these to you at the cafeteria.”

Shin entered, carrying a bouquet of pink and red poppies in the center, with white clovers, dandelions and other wild grass in the middle. They were at Lena’s office in the main camp of the Mobile Strike Package, Rüstkammer Base.

Lena, looking up, beamed.

“Wow. Thank you very much...even the Poppies are blooming at the training grounds, huh?”

“The cornflowers at the second training fields are blooming too. Do I bring some for you next time? ...No.”

Shin noticed something, that there probably was no space for the flowers.

There were several vases on the mantelpiece and the reception table, all from previous visitors.

Within Lena's office in the Mobile Strike Package, there was a bunch of seasonal bunches that were somehow still lively.

"You're pretty adored, Your Highness."

The adjutant took the bouquet Shin was carrying, and brought it to the command room. She looked around, probably a little bothered about where she should put the flowers.

For some reason, Shin was looking at where she was looking, only to be captivated by the colorful flowers on Lena's office desk.

There were no vases there, but there were several small items neatly placed at the edges, and amongst them was a small glass bottle with vibrant colored flowers.

It was probably called a Herbarium. Dried flowers were preserved in transparent oil, stored in the glass bottle, as a plant specimen for interior decoration.

Then, his eyes remained on the lycoris and the ribbon tied on the tightly sealed bottleneck.

Lena noticed his stare, and said.

"Those were received from the Federacy before I went over....."

Before her words trailed off, she continued with a mischievous smile.

She knew who it was she met on the lycoris field.

"Was it you, Shin?"

"Actually, it's the five of us."

So this is why there are five colors?

Red, white, pink, yellow and blue. Vibrant colors.

"Back then, I was thinking that it was the day before you came over. If it were you, you probably would be focusing on the documents, Lena...never thought you would keep them."

"It might be a little presumptuous, but, no, Second Lieutenant Perschmann really helped me out."

She looked towards her adjutant, Second Lieutenant Isabella Perschmann, saying that. The latter had initially worked hard to accustom herself to the white

pigs of the Republic, and that moment was the opportunity that allowed them to break the ice.

It's because you're pretty useless, Colonel. I really can't watch this anymore..... Second Lieutenant Perschmann seemed to mutter, before retreating away. Lena saw her leave, and lifted her head towards Shin again, smiling.

It was the first time she received a Valentine's gift, not out of mischief or any other reasons, but simply out of concern.

“Really, I am glad...thank you very much.”

T/N: Rüstkammer. The HQ for the Eighty-Sixth Squad post Volume 3. Name is based on the Dresden Armory.

Volume 4

Animate Bonus

The door to the research lab opened, and Annette was stunned once she saw Lena.

“...What’s with that hair?”

“Ah...I have no idea...”

Lena said, tilting her head in confusion.

The hair strands grazed her cheeks, and the one bundle that had been dyed bloodred was tied in braids.

“Why is it like this after waking up?”

It happened not too long ago.

Lena, still unused to dealing with electronic files, was falling behind on her administrative duties, and was sleep deprived for days dealing with them. Shin knew about this, and assisted with work at the guest desk in her office. He sensed her standing up at the desk behind him, and looked over.

Despite Shin advising her to sleep, Her Highness the tactical commander kept working as she felt apologetic. Thus, her eyelids would close at any given moment, her proud back slouching over, and most importantly, her legs were starting to wobble.

She was no longer groggy, she was lifeless like a zombie in a horror flick.

Sensing that she might be on the verge of breaking her limits and falling over, Shin tried talking to her.

“...Lena?”

“Shin...mind lending your back...?”

...Ah?

Shin was stunned, and felt the lighter weight on the back of his uniform. He looked over while still paralyzed, and Lena, placed her little head on his shoulder, falling asleep.

The colder body warmth and feeble sleeping breath reached him, along with the faint hoary perfume on Lena. He found himself in a tight spot. *What is this...*

...Eh, whatever.

Shin was used to remaining still due to his infiltration activities, and gave up on thinking within a second, content with this situation.

But he could at least pull a prank on her.

In any case, his work was almost done. There was nothing more he could do.

While the bloodred eyes were drifting into air, a tinge of silver appeared before his eyes.

Frederica opened a gap at the heavy commander's office doors after much effort, and peered inside.

And thus, she was stupefied.

"Shinei...what exactly art thou doing...?"

"Being really bored."

"No...well...thus is obvious, but..."

Lena's face was leaning on Shin's back, and the latter could not move around easily with her sleeping on him. Well, that was nothing at the least.

Frederica however was referring to Shin tying the silver hair strands in braids, once, twice, thrice, until the three bunches were tied in braids.

As a short-haired male, he did not know how to tie braids well. With his unskilled hands, he slowly braided the fine silver hair together, letting it loose thereafter, and making new braids.

He enjoyed the feeling of combing her hair, so much so that he never let go.

.....It was said that combing hair was a deeper affection of love than sharing the same bed.

".....Thou seem to be enjoying this."

"Hm."

He unwittingly admitted this.

Looking utterly frustrated with him, Frederica sighed.

"...Since thou cannot move, thy shall look for Anju or else. Do wait."

"Nnnnn...?"

Lena herself never remembered what happened before and after she slept.

She tilted her head, and Annette frowned. For the time being,

"Why don't you untie it?"

In any case, the braids were utterly terrible.

Simply put, they were not actually braids, just crudely bundled together. It was obvious that someone forgot the order to tie it, for several parts were messy...surely that person was not familiar with doing this.

The extremely messy braids appeared to be done by a child.

“You say so, but...”

Lena lifted the braided hair.

While perturbed by how it was tied by a child who did not really know how to do so, she could sense the dotingness from it.

“...For some reason, I cannot let this go.”

HELP!

Males were typically stronger than females.

Lena knew this. At this point, she was lying on the small bed along with Shin, being embraced tightly, unable to move, unable to resist. The exceptionally heavy arms were reached over the body, rounding to her back, bringing their skins together. They were extremely hot, and so was her face.

What was going on? It seemed she was on fire.

She was firmly embraced, unable to move her head. Entering her ears were the soft breathing above her head, along with the pounding heart. Annette, witnessing this through the door entrance, asked,

“...What are you doing, Lena?”

“Help me!”

“Enjoy yourselves.”

What are you saying?

“Or are you done already? Done the deed?”

“Not at all! This is...”

About thirty minutes ago.

Lena, walking down the corridor of the Liberté Égalité Fraternité base, met a stumbling Shin wandering around not in the office area, nor the Processors’ quarters, but a place devoid of passers-by.

Due to the underground battle of the Charité Labyrinth, Shin finally succumbed to his fatigue, and slept for several days, only to wake up on this day. While he was finally recovered, it seemed he could not see well, his eyes narrowed into slits. His footsteps seemed wobbly, the scarf on his shirt falling off like a child.

Simply put, he was in a daze.

“Shin.”

Once he heard his name mentioned, Shin noticed Lena before his eyes.

“...Lena.”

“What is the matter. Why are you here?”

“Hm...I woke up, had a shower, but strangely, after the shower, I wanted to sleep more...”

“...But the showertaps are broken.”

The Federacy had temporarily set up base, and thus, it was rather shoddy compared to the others.

Leaving aside the state of the accommodations, Lena saw how Shin was on the verge of snoozing, and grimaced,

“Shin...you are lost now, no?”

At the very least, it was not the path leading Shin from the bunk to the showers.

And Shin, upon being questioned, narrowed his eyes again, observing where he was, and said,

“...Where, is this place?”

Well, to be expected.

“I’ll bring you to your room. Follow me.”

So Lena led Shin by the hand, like a child, and brought him to his room. She had him sleep on the bed, and he obediently followed suit. (It seemed initially however that he was sleeping as he walked, never looking back.)

While she had no obligation to, she laid a blanket on him like a big sister.

“Now then, wake up when it is dinner...good night.”

Saying that, she turned to leave.

...But Lena, being all alone, forgot one thing. That day, due to the faulty showers, only warm water was provided. Thus, Shin’s body was all cold.

He, chilly and groggy, naturally sought warmth instinctively, and it was no wonder that he would grab the heat source before him, not letting go.

Suddenly, Lena was grabbed by the hand.

The moment she realized what happened, she was pinned down onto the bed.

“Eh?”

Lena looked dumbfounded. Shin embraced Lena firmly as he kept sleeping.

“Ehhhhhhh~~~~!?”

So Annette, having heard everything, raised an eyebrow like an annoyed cat,

“So you can be replaced with a heat kettle? ...What do we do now?”

“It is the responsibility of those who failed to repair faulty showers. First off, I shall reprimand...”

“...That will make things complicated. How about you try pulling yourself out, like the usual?”

“You say that, but if I exert, I will wake him up...”

As she was embraced firmly, unable to turn her head, Lena could not see Shin’s face, only his quiet breathing voice as he slept. She finally put him to bed, and could not bring herself to wake him up again.

“Eh...really? Hmm, do you not find it a pity?”

“This...”

Then, without a further word, Frederica entered the room, and grumpily lifted the blanket covering the duo, Shin’s arms relaxed a little, probably because he was a little warmer, and Lena finally managed to break free from Shin’s clutches.

“Th-thank you...ehehe...”

Annette and Frederica saw that Lena’s face was as red as before, stumbling in fatigue, and they sighed in unison.

One would say Lena was lucky, for when Frederica questioned nonchalantly the following day, it seemed Shin had no recollection of the matter.

Gamers Bonus

Onyx, including Shin, were generally speaking alcoholic heroes.

According to Ernst, they are warrior class from the ancient times, and were resistant to all kinds of drugs, and not just alcohol. In short, Shin was no exception. He hardly got drunk even when drinking. His fellow Onyx, Raiden, too was no exception. Anju and Theo were somewhat capable of holding their liquor, though not as much as the former, and Kurena, who had the least alcohol tolerance, was capable of drinking enough to handle social occasions.

So.

Never in his life till this point did Shin think there was someone with such weak alcohol tolerance, a mere sip would leave her delirious.

The righteous scolding came from a very close distance, up close and personal in fact

“Captain Nouzen! Are you listening!?”

He was not. Or rather, he was in no mood to listen.

Shin looked back at the alluringly flushed face of Lena that was 30% drunk, looking back at him from a ridiculously close distance. He could not help but be terrified.

They were of similar ages, but Shin and Lena were in their late teens, and had a height difference of about fifteen centimeters. The eye levels would never be the same when conversing normally.

Again to emphasis, if they were chatting normally.

Simply put, Shin was stationed at a base, and he was pushed down onto the bed in the room of four.

His wrists were grabbed, and her knees were by his flanks, rendering him unable to move.

Raiden peeked in from the entrance, and asked with a look of bewilderment and bemusement,

“...What are you doing?”

“Save me.”

“Flirting?”

What do you mean by that?

“I mean, it’s not that bad. Continue to make out with her all you want.”

“They’re big. They’re too much for me.”

I don’t know what you’re talking about.

“...Shin. I guess your words and your thoughts are completely reversed. You’re saying what you’re really thinking. Looks like you’re definitely shaken and don’t know why.”

“You should have known something’s wrong when you heard him actually call for help.”

Theo, peeking in from the entrance as well, noted so, and Raiden sighed with disdain before saying,

“...So what the hell happened to cause such an interesting scene?”

“It’s not interesting at all...didn’t I give you some wine from the Far East after dinner?”

“I brought it to Kaie and the others, but I might have brought a little too much...”

This base, which was used as a camp for a few days, was not far from the first battlezone of the old Eighty-Sixth District of the Republic. Just a little prior to this scenario, Shin felt that since it was a rare chance, he wanted to bring along the wine from the Far East where Kaie’s ancestors were from, and visited the grave there where his comrades laid.

Most of the wine was given to the Processors, but the remaining wine that was left as an offering caught Lena’s interest. When they returned to the base, the men were so drunk and causing a ruckus. Shin felt it would not be good to bring Lena over there, so he had her come to his room.

This was where the mistake was made.

After hearing the situation, Raiden looked bewildered, and snorted.

“What’s so hard about it? Can’t you just push her away?”

“If it’s not for where this room is, in this state...!”

Although Shin was completely pinned down by her full weight, Lena was rather light, and Shin could at least nudge her off given the massive arm strength honed on the battlefield he grew up in.

However, this military base was close to the frontlines, and so the room and beds were cramped to the bare minimum possible for living needs. To be blunt, it was really cramped.

If he pushed Lena away, she would fall off the bed.

He could grab her if his hands were free, but unfortunately, his hands were held down by her delicate hands, and if he tried to shake them off, she would again lose her balance and fall off the bed. After all, her eyes and small silver head were shifting around unsteadily at the moment, and a rash move could injure her. It was hard for Shin to make a move in this situation.

“Ahh—well? Right, she’s ready to give herself to you for an embrace. It’ll be embarrassing for the guy to refuse.”

“How does she look like she’s giving herself to me? It’s obviously unexpected!”

“In this case, it looks like Shin took her into the room, got her drunk and went berserk...”

“Berserk...”

Raiden ignored the speechless Shin and said to Shiden, who was in the hallway.

“Shiden, this situation is so funny. Let them be for another half an hour before you retrieve Lena.

“...Eh, I don’t mind...but can he handle half an hour, in more ways than one?”

“Lena’s the one who can’t last thirty minutes, right? Should be fine...ah.”

The moment he said so, Lena just ran out of energy and plopped over.

Naturally, Shin was pinned down.

“Wait...!”

Shin seemed to let out something resembling a scream, but Raiden ignored him.

In any case, he closed the door.

Shiden probably had enough of it, and immediately went to save Shin.

And, perhaps fortunately, Raiden confirmed the next day that Lena had no recollection of the incident.

Melonbooks Bonus

Even though it was a co-ed facility, Lena knocked on the door before entering. She opened the door, she only saw Shin asleep on a bench inside.

Looking at the unexpected light in front of her, Lena blinked. They were inside the first hangar changing room of Rüstkammer base, headquarters of the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package. Shin had fallen asleep while leaning gently against the wall, his arms folded.

Lena was slightly surprised and then smiled.

They had carried out night exercises in the training field in the back, and Shin reported the results of the drill operations before disappearing. Lena wondered where he had gone.

During the previous night's exercise, Shin, a senior member of the package, acted as the "Aggressor". He had survived longer than every single Processor, but it seemed even he was not immune to fatigue.

They had exchanged words for half a year or so two years ago, but it was the first time she saw him sleep. Whenever Lena and Shin were linked through Para-RAID, they could not synchronize if one side was unconscious, they could not be attuned. So when Shin was sleeping, it was natural that they could not communicate with each other.

Attracted by the novelty, Lena approached. She tried not to disturb the resting Shin by ensuring that her heels did not click.

She walked up to him and slightly moved over to take a closer look at his sleeping face.

Perhaps it was because of his reticent personality, but there were times when Shin would show a calm and seemingly indifferent expression. When he was asleep, that indifference disappeared completely, and unexpectedly, he would look a little childish. Perhaps it was the sight befitting of someone his age...but it could also be because he was always on edge, unlike Lena, who too was in her teenage years but was still sufficiently young looking to be called a child.

Lena wondered if she should wake him up, and tell him to go back to his room to rest—and it was a rest day too—given how soundly he slept though, she could not bring herself to wake him up. Driven by this urge, she continued to stare at his sleeping face for quite a while..

It was like observing a sleeping beast that was not good with people.

If Shin were to wake up, Lena would be too embarrassed to remain up close. It was the first time she sized him up.

The white and handsome face was said to be the characteristic of the old imperial nobility. If it was not for the fact that he was wearing the Panzer jacket during the exercise, nobody would have assumed he was a soldier.

Ah, the eyelashes are unexpectedly a bit long.

So Lena thought, and she unconsciously reached out her hand to the single eyelid that was calmly curled up, the eyelash of a different color from hers, the forehead that had a light-colored scar left over the left eye, and the cheek line that showed the transition from a fragile youth to a strong, trained man.

If she touch it.

What would it feel like...? Suddenly, the door of the bathroom located at the opposite side of the room was opened violently.

“Ah!! Feels good after a bath! ...Ah...”

Shiden’s red hair was still dripping, and her voluptuous body was exposed without underwear. She was in high spirits as she exited with only a shirt and combat pants on.

“Oh, Your Majesty, you’re going to play a prank? Shall I go out for a while?”

The flushed Lena, backed up to the entrance of the dressing room almost instantly.

“No, this is not it! I did not, pinch his nose, or anything, Nothing of that sort at all!”

“...Eh, I didn’t think you’ll do a childish prank either, that’s all.”

“Ah, ah, yes, the weather is fine today! I shall top up the watering device. Time to comb the cat too since I am halfway done! Excuse me!”

With that, the red-faced Bloody Reina escaped the changing room with this spiel of illogical words. She probably stumbled three times in an exaggerated manner while panicking, and her high heels could be heard moving quickly down the corridor.

Shiden, who was watching, also turned her eyes back inside the dressing room.

“Now then, you woke up a long time ago, little handsome.”

Shin opened his blood-red eyes without a word as he was gazed at by eyes of a different color.

“When did you wake up?”

“I can’t help but wake up when someone’s shouting at my ear.

Shin was unsure of what was going on, but he decided to continue to pretend to sleep because he thought it would be more troublesome if he opened his eyes.

Shiden, on the other hand, snorted.

“I—————see!”

Shin looked annoyed.

“...What?”

“No. But if I were the one approaching, you’d be awake already.”

“.....”

Shin narrowed his eyes in disdain, for he probably sensed the implications of the banter, and Shiden laughed callously.

“Well, I’m the one who’s better at hiding my presence. Her Majesty can’t do that at all...I guess the little Reaper of the Eastern Front is really defenseless against her.”

Bicycle

“Look, Lena, I’m not telling you off here, just giving you advice.”

Though he said that, Shin was looking around strangely for some reason.

The headless Reaper, who had survived seven years of fighting against the Legion, was witnessing a reality even he found unacceptable.

Slightly afar was Shiden, sitting like a delinquent, her elbows on her thighs, holding up her face, pondering.

Well, her feelings were understandable. The outspoken Shiden found it unbelievable.

How,

“How did you end up falling over on a bicycle with training wheels?”

The Bloody Queen was all teary faced, probably either the fall was too painful, or that she was so pathetic.

“How would I know? I did not intend to fall over!”

“You could’ve slowed down and turned back then.”

Well, typically, when it gets too fast, brakes needs to be applied on the front wheels.

Shiden probably had experience falling from the bicycle during her childhood. For that matter, Shin probably did so too when he was at a similarly young age.

The result of that experience was a dramatic fall and a loud bawl, and Shin was fortunate that Shiden, who did not understand how it felt, did not ask him about it.

“If-if you say so, how about you ride on it instead, Shin!? This is a bicycle! It moves as fast as the wind, you know!?”

Lena pointed furiously at Frederica, who too was learning how to ride a cute, child-sized bicycle, shaking as she advanced.

Raiden accompanied her practice as he leisurely watched her back, while encouraging her (with lies). “Almost there. Keep going.”

“Really!? Am I holding up well?”

“Frederica, watch your back.”

“Oh...ohhh!? How about it!? I truly am moving well!”

“Got it. Look front. You’re going to crash.”

“Ohhhhh!! What is with this speed? Moving as fast as the wind!”

That side’s having fun, so Shiden thought. They were really enjoying themselves.

On this side, it was a disaster all around.

It was unknown if Shin actually had the same thoughts, but as he looked over at Frederica, he answered,

“I know how to ride one too.”

“You are lying! Anyway, you entered elementary school just before you went to the concentration camp, did you not, Shin!? When did you learn how to ride a bicycle!?”

Such words would have angered any other Eighty-Six, but Shin did not seem to mind.

“Before I entered elementary school.”

“Ehh!?”

“No, that’s the case for me too. I rode on this before. It’s just a transport after all. I learned it because I wanted to catch up to my older brother or my friends.”

Shiden interrupted, and Shin nodded.

Annette, who had witnessed everything, interrupted.

“Speaking of which, Lena, I too know how to ride a bicycle.”

“Annette...!? Et tu...!?”

Lena’s attempt to ride a bicycle resulted in the mood resembling the end of the world.

“.....Shin. What should I do...?”

Immediately after sniveling, she looked up at Shin intently, and the latter sighed.

“...Anyway, it’s a rest day today. Let’s just see how much you can progress.”

Keep going, so Annette thought.

So you guys still aren’t dating? Shiden thought.

Well,

As a pampered Princess of ex-nobility, Lena had never seen an actual bicycle, let alone rode on one. It was no wonder she initially could not grasp the basics, and did not know how to cycle.

As a result of this full day special training, Her Highness was barely able to cycle at sunset.

A Cat Is Here

“.....Shin. Erm, please help me out here.”

Shin opened the office door, and looked towards the reluctant sounding Lena.

On a corner of the massive wooden desk was what appeared to be a spider the size of a palm.

“A Huntsman spider.....huh?”

“The species does not matter right now!”

Lena was glaring directly at that spider, feeling terrorized as she retorted.

The spider noticed that it was noticed by a massive thing, and was (most likely) flustered as it remained on the corner of the table, before straightening its foreleg as it tried to intimidate.

Well, this carnivorous animal would typically hunt little mice, and not attack humans. At the very least, nobody in the Federacy and Republic would actually eat spiders (typically).

This leeriness from both sides made the entire scene surrealistic.

“It just dropped from the ceiling.”

“The 3rd’s in the middle of live exercise. Wonder if it’s due to the shock from the artillery?”

The two thousand or so Processors of the Eighty-Sixth Mobile Strike Package were grouped into four squads, with two groups at most undertaking each operation, one group at the training school undertaking their exercise. This allowed for ample fighting strength and morale gained from a suitable amount of rest. There was also a directive planned for the Eighty-Six to return to society.

Currently, the first group, including Shin was in charge of the operation with the second group. The fourth is the standby, while the third is the training group. While this conversation was going on, the bombardments of the 88mm tank cannons (blanks) kept echoing outside the window.

“I do not need any analysis. Just get it off.”

Lena looked so tense, she was on the verge of tears.

Ahh, so Shin reached his hand out——

A *toy*!? The black cat TP darted in from the bedroom next door. Shin caught it, and lifted it up.

“Why is it that cats like to come in after noticing bugs next to people?”

“.....!? Erm, Shin, what are you doing.....!?”

Without thinking, Lena asked.

TP seemed to be conveying its displeasure as its eyes widened fully, glaring at the spider with excitement. Shin continued on while holding that TP without much effort.

He looked around the room, had a thought, and went towards the ajar bedroom that was being aired out.

“It’ll be troublesome to leave a cat around if there are spiders and other bugs. Sometimes it’ll eat them.”

“Wait, it eats.....!?”

“Come to think of it, when a bug appears, you need to deal with the cat first.”

Saying that, Shin brought it to the bedroom it came from, and closed the door (once TP landed on the bed, it immediately darted towards the door, but Shin’s instincts immediately reacted, resulting in his victory). He quietly returned to the desk, and grabbed the hapless spider with one hand.

He turned his back on Lena as he picked it up, probably so that she could not see. Perhaps it was a habit for him?

Well, most of the Eighty-Sixth District was removed from human dominion for a long time——in other words, in this environment full of unpruned fauna and lack of pesticide, there were lots of bugs without existing predators. If she really reviled the bugs so much that she would stay away from there, she would have nowhere to go. In fact, Shiden herself did not care about those wriggly things.

The eight legs of the spider wriggled, panicking after it was lifted up. Meanwhile, Lena was all too unwilling to look at that spider..

“Do you mind if I throw it out of the window?”

“Please do so.....wait..... Shin?”

Lena said, realizing something.

At this point.

Right behind Lena was a window——and Shin was standing there, with an impulse rising within him.

“If you put it on my hair, I will be really angry……!!”

“……”

Silence.

She looked back, and found Shin looking like a mischievous kid caught before he could enact his prank, awkwardly looking aside.

Really, he is unexpectedly mischievous, just like a child, so Lena thought. While she felt this immaturity unbefitting of him was not uncute to begin with, she definitely could not let him off the hook.

“Throw it away. Right now. This is an order, Captain.”

“……Understood.”

Looking disinterested, Shin dumped the unfortunate spider into the decoration outside the window.

He then shut the window to prevent the spider from slipping in accidentally.

He then turned towards Lena, who had been watching from behind, chuckling.

“You’re the commander of the spider monster-like Juggernaut, but you really can’t handle spiders, huh?”

“Did I not mention it before? That has nothing to do with this……!”

Lena muttered, and Shin chuckled once again.

He went towards the bedroom where TP was in.

Later, TP was searching for spiders all over the room, and found one outside the window. “Over there!” It called out to Shin, seemingly begging.

However, it was refused by Lena.

Her Highness is Training

The matching blue and white colors of the refreshing sportswear and T-shirt was coupled with shiny running shoes, untanned thighs, and spats that catches the eyes.

The mobile strike package's limited edition '86' bar towel was draped around her neck, while the word 'Lena' was written on the torso of the T-shirt.

"...Lena, what's with that getup?"

They were at the headquarters of the Eighty-Sixth Mobile Strike Package, the gym of Luancamo Base. Shin was a little taken aback. He was dressed in the Federacy's combat fatigues, and had been training his physical fitness.

Lena was dressed in different clothing than usual, and looked energetic, as befitting of a girl. Excitedly, she said,

"These are gym clothes!"

"I can tell. The PT for us combatants must be too much for you though."

There were various military clothing, like ceremonial dress, daily PT clothings, combat fatigues for training and actual combat, pilot uniform, and various others, but the Republic army had a 'no human combatant' directive, and thus had no such things. Thus, while Lena might be dressed in gym clothes, as the commander, her physicality and physique was completely different from the Processors. She might even end up wrecking her body.

"It is fine. I have designed another menu for myself."

"So you say...but why are you thinking of training?"

Lena lacked the strength, but it did not affect her commanding.

At this moment, Lena showed a panicked look, her eyes wavering.

"Ehh...erm, that..."

She started looking bashful, her silvery white eyes twirling about...for they were faced with Shin's mystified eyes. She finally made up her mind, and said,

"Actually...I have become fatter."

Eh, where? So Shin thought.

The Eighty-Six had grown up on the battlefield, and even the girls were muscular.

For Shin, who was used to them, Lena's physique was a little slender. He was always worried if she had eaten enough.

So Lena, not knowing what Shin was thinking, rubbed her delicate hands, saying,

"Ever since I arrived in the Federacy, the food here is really good! The meat, the bread, the vegetables are all real..."

Unlike the synthesized food generated from the Republic's factories, the Federacy had access to natural foods. Delivery to the military in particular was of utmost priority.

"Everyone enjoyed themselves with the food, so I accidentally eat too much."

"The Ischbeen and the sausage stew were excellent."

"Y-yes, the meat taste was rich, the sourness of the sauerkraut and the mustard...no!"

Lena, who had been mesmerized with them, reeled back into despair. For some reasons, her eyes were teary.

"But Shin, girls want to be, well...slender or something, right!?"

"Well personally, I'm..."

Shin accidentally baited himself into saying so, and was quietly alarmed, so he kept quiet. *That was close.*

On a side note, Lena was still continuing with her bombshell of words, but neither noticed it.

"Thus, I am going to slim down using exercise! I am going to change myself this summer!"

Why summer?

The intensity of the battlefield had dulled much of his peacetime memories. In other words, for Shin, it was hard to recall what the customary summer activities were.

"Exercise is good...but don't force yourself. It'll be for nothing if you destroy your body."

"I...guess. That makes sense. Thank you..."

"Just to note, lunch today is Schnitzel. Exercise too much, and you won't get to eat it."

“...Are you the devil, Shin!?”

Shin sat on the court, watched Lena puff her cheeks as she sprinted down the gym... *Better exercise in moderation in the beginning if you're unused to it*, so he thought.



86-エイティンクスー
(ヴラディレーナ・ミリーゼ)
著者/安里アサト イラスト/しらび

Starry Rain • Sparkling Lemonade

The Eighty-Six were the elite soldiers who survived the Eighty-Sixth Sector's battlefield of extinction. Even so, they were merely teenage boys and girls with the enthusiasm and curiosity to match, and were often reckless.

“What are you all up to, this...”

With her hair and clothes drenched, Lena couldn't help but sigh. There was a lemon scent emitting from her surroundings, and the carbonic acid irritated her skin.

Supposedly, when a certain type of candy was added to a carbonated drink there would be effervescence released in an exaggerated manner.

So, after hearing this, Shin and the others immediately put it to the test.

They could have used a 500ml bottle, but a dozen people or so used two-liter bottles for experiment.

The resulting jet of soda reached several meters high, beyond their expectations, and drenched everyone present at the scene, including Lena who was passing by.

Shin, one of the involved troublemakers, froze in his place with an expression that said ‘Oh shit!’, and his shoulders slumped dejectedly.

“...I'm sorry.”

“Ah, seriously...”

Lena's annoyance vanished unwittingly once she saw his severely dispirited face,

The scent of lemon lingered strongly, and the popping of the carbonic acid continued to irritate her skin.

Yet, Lena couldn't help but be reminded of countless stars glimmering in the Milky Way.

“Be a little careful next time, you know?”

Lena smiled wryly like an older sister as she looked at this naughty boy of the same age who was taller than her.

Dengeki 61

The light of the full moon shone amazingly brightly on the ruins, and countless pale red petals gathered under the sakura trees of the Far East, as though giving rise to this hazy moonlight.

They were in the Eastern Front's first ward of the Republic, which Spearhead Squadron was responsible. In the rubble-buried streets of the abandoned city, the cherry trees were neatly arranged on both sides of the street, and in full bloom. The canopy of the light-flowered sakura trees had almost completely blotted the straight road unique to the Republic.

One could look up to see the blue moonlight shining upon the petals that were falling raindrops. It was a spring night, a breeze blowing, and even the beasts slept soundly. The pale red flowers under the silent moonlight night appeared to be transformed into some evil demon.

Leaning back against the Juggernaut that was parked atop a pile of rubble at a suitable height, Shin looked up at the silent and enchanting scene.

Let's go see the flowers, it was Kaie who suggested so, wanting to see how the cherry blossoms appeared while blooming in the dark. It was a custom from the Far East, where she originated from. Enjoy the flowers, enjoy the sake. It was also the spring event that her people love when the seasons change.

Although Kaie, who was born in Republic, did not have much understanding of this, she had a partial inkling to understand this past, and found some sake utensils of the Far East.

The cup was an unfamiliar, flat piece of drinking utensil that felt light as paper after years of being used to metal cutlery. It was said that the wood was shaved and applied with some special pigment. This pigment called lacquer looked very deep, as though anyone using it would be drawn in. The sake clear as water reflected the sakuras.

After a little sip, the alcohol that burned the throat dissipated a strong and mellow sweetness, refreshing the heart. It was the sweet taste of grains, which he had recently known a little about recently.

Gulp, Mashu finished his drink at once. He had silver hair of a Celesta and light blue eyes, and a strong body and height like a snow leopard.

“—Tastes good.”

He was not much of a talker, and was a bit too quiet. Shin just smiled lightly at the teenager who was the Spearhead Squadron's machine gunner.

"Looks like our efforts weren't wasted this time."

"I don't know how it's supposed to taste like—but I guess it's good."

"Somehow, I feel lighter after drinking it."

Mina, holding the small cup with her hands, smiled. She had blonde hair tied in a braid, the symbol of an Emerald and and brown eyes of an Agate. She looked short and young, but she was part of the vanguard.

"...You can't hold your liquor? Don't drink too much then."

Kujo, a southern Onyx with black hair and black skin, showed a wry smile as he downed his cup. He was the cheerful hunk who wrote the countdown to retirement—or KIA on the hangar blackboard, and he looked strong compared to his fragile looking little stepsister.

"Might be a little late though~ why are you spinning around, Kujo~?"

"Goodness..."

"Ehe (∇)"

"Well, you shouldn't drink so much if you're already that tipsy."

Kaie glanced aside at the row of sakura trees and gave a wry smile.

Before her was the sight of a drunken mess, Daiya, Haruto, Kino and Touma were doing a strange dance. The other boys and girls were yapping away and cheering on.

While Chise was hiding in the back, the slightly tanned Kuroto with silver hair forcibly dragged Chise by the small hand to join in on this intriguing dance. *Wow~* the onlookers cheered enthusiastically.

Kaie, the one who suggested this event, watched on with a conflicted look as she saw her comrades start a commotion like wild horses.

"The thing about enjoying flowers is that it should be focused on marvelling. Going crazy and being drunk is defeats the purpose of it...and besides, aren't they too quick to get drunk? Are they not used to it? Well, I guess it's their first time drinking after all."

These domesticated human-like animals were deemed to have no human rights. The Eighty-Six's daily diet consisted of bland, synthetic food, and it was impossible to give them anything they liked.

“Well, as long as they have fun.”

“...You’re already way before them now, right? I’ve always wanted to say this, but I only managed to convey it now.”

Kaie then pouted her coral colored lips that were thicker than the sakuras above them, smiling wryly.

“But it’s really fun though. Everyone’s together, yapping away. We’ve been fighting for years, but such moments are really rare.”

Everyone really enjoyed the time they had with their comrades during the moments of rest, and when there were no other trivial matters.

Kujo gave a cheerful smile.

“Yeah, we’ll lose if we can’t have fun!”

“That’s right!”

A completely drunk-looking Mina, who was playing with the giant man, spiritedly raised her hands towards the sky, while one could see Mashu show a smile, a rare sight at that.

At that moment, Daiya and Haruto stopped their octopus dance and came over.

“Hm, huh? Whatcha want?”

Daiya’s face was slightly flushed.

His voice was a little slurred, and his expression slack. He looked a little unsteady.

It seemed he was really drunk, for it was his first time drinking.

Kaie, who was sitting, looked up at the face that was positioned high up, and frowned,

“You guys know you’re noisy right? Daiya, Haruto.”

“Heh, that’s because,”

Daiya giggled and waved a hand.

“I’m on fire after drinking this. It’s like, yeah, a festival! That’s how it feels!”

“Besides, Shin and Kaie, isn’t the mood around you two too calm? We don’t always get the chance to have fun! Yay! Come here!”

Haruto, who was speaking with an accent just moments ago, suddenly glazed over.

“Ah, sorry sorry. I shouldn’t have done this. Stop it, Shin and Mashu. No need for the courtesy. Ah, don’t make it sound like the end of the world is coming soon. It’s really scary.”

““Yay.””

“Spare me bros.”

The two of them spoke flatly, and immediately dealt with Haruto (very violently). Kujo could not help but laugh, and Mina, who had no idea what they were talking about since the beginning, also giggled out loud.

Daiya looked upwards with his arms folded.

“But I want to come up with an activity for everyone to have fun too. If not a snowball fight, then a sakura fight, or maybe a treasure hunt under those trees!”

Kujo said,

“No, just enjoy the sakuras.”

“Ehh~, they look pretty, but it’s still too boring.”

“Nya~”

“...I’d have forgotten about the cat if you didn’t mention it.”

Mashu muttered in a low voice, while Haruto, playing the fool, pouted.

The wryly smiling Shin said,

“They usually bury corpses under the sakura trees. There won’t be treasure.”

““You’re kidding!?””

But for some reason, Daiya’s and Haruto’s eyes lit up.

“Fine by me! Let’s go have a look!”

“Kino, Kino! Did you bring the shovel? Men!”

“Why would we have one, you idiot?”

“Let’s get a shovel and start digging from somewhere! We’ll have a contest to see who digs one up first!!”

“Hey, that’s cheating! Wait a minute, Daiya!”

As soon as the words left their mouths, Daiya, Haruto, Kino and Touma rushed towards the sakura trees.

Kaie, who saw them leave, slumped her shoulders.

“Good grief...”

Suddenly, Mina stood up.

“Ah, Kujo, look! It’s a shooting star!”

“No, wait, don’t do that...don’t go chasing after shooting stars like a kid!”

Upon seeing Mina give chase after the shooting star, Kujo immediately stood up. *Sorry*, Kujo raised his hand to apologize and immediately ran after the little bunny chasing the shooting star.

Then, Mashu, who had been smiling wryly, stood up as well.

“I’ll go help.”

After he said that, he gave chase after the two. The silhouettes clad in camouflages disappeared one after another in the darkness of the night under the sakura trees.

“.....”

Chise lost his bearings as he staggered towards the trees. Noticing this, Kuroto hurried after him. The two of them waved over, and disappeared into the darkness of the towering trees.

They disappeared one after another. The Spearhead Squadron members gradually left the stage after toasting under the sakura trees, amidst laughter. As the petals danced, the girls got up and left, waving vigorously with occasional squeals, and also disappeared in the direction of the flowers. The two teenager soldiers that were laughing and walking saluted as well, and followed after them.

One after another, the crowd departed.

They went beyond the darkness.

Nobody knew what was beyond the night.

Just as they knew not of the day of their demise.

The Dead had passed and no longer existed, and the night waited for no man. The laughter that echoed finally returned to silence.

Kaie, the last one left behind, elegantly raised her glass and downed it all.

“...It’s great. It’s amazing how you managed to find this rice wine from the Far East. Did you get this for me?”

“Yes. I think it’s more appropriate.”

Kaie, who had taken the sakuras as part of her last memories in a corner of this battlefield, did not know the flavor of the wine brewed in the land of her forefathers.

Indeed, until the end, she never knew what it really tasted like.

The Eighty-Six, born in the Republic and raised on the battlefield, knew nothing of the world beyond the battlefield.

And they withered away without understanding others.

Kaie held the empty glass in front of her chest with both hands and smiled.

“...In the country where my ancestors were born, you can’t drink if you’re under twenty years old. I think you crossed the line today.”

Shin showed a wry smile once she said this in a serious manner.

“You’re at that age now, aren’t you?”

“Yeah...I guess. I was eighteen two years ago. I can’t remember when my birthday was.”

They were thrown into the Eighty-Sixth District, tormented under the harsh environment of the concentration camp and the cruelty of the battlefield; their sense of dates blurred.

The family members who celebrated their birthdays had also died almost instantly, so most of them hardly remembered their own birthdays.

That was what Shin thought at least, and so did Kaie. After all memories of his parents, brother, and homeland that vaguely came to mind, or was about to, they forgot about their birthdays.

The fatal battlefield set up to clear the Eighty-Sixth District did not require such things.

“—April 7.”

Once he said so, Kaie opened her eyes

Shin looked at her and told her a sincere tone.

“After the fall of Republic, they found the personnel files of all the Processors from the Republic army headquarters. There were mine and Raiden’s, and the other units as well.”

That was the evidence of the existence of the KIA Eighty-Six—that were supposedly erased, even their names and graves.

“It’s possible to track back the family name and original addresses to some extent from there. Of course, that includes the birth date—and the home, even though we won’t recognize it if we go there.”

After the Federacy’s army recaptured the First District Liberté et Égalité, Shin took the opportunity that came with the lull to have a look.

There was no need to remember that unfamiliar home, and it could be said he merely dropped by to have a look.

“...So that’s why you came over today? In April when the sakuras are in full bloom?”

“That’s right. But,”

They were born into the world, and would only stop at the very end. They survived after years of trials and tribulations, and survive. They did exist. Recently, they planned to hold a birthday event for those soldiers during this period close to Kaie’s birthday.

But why?

“I still remember. I haven’t forgotten. I want to tell you this again.”

He promised to bring along a piece of those he had fought alongside with, who had died before him, until the very end. It was also his duty as an Undertaker. He had yet to abandon that responsibility.

He did not forget.

The Eighty-Six were not allowed to erect graves. The comrades of Spearhead Squadron were in eternal slumber at unknown whereabouts. This place signified huge tombstone.

At this point, he survived and stepped into this place again.

“This is how...”

Kaie looked down and smiled faintly.

“You’re...born in May, right? ...Now you caught up to me. You’re two years younger than me.”

“Yeah.”

“I hate this, but,”

At this point, Kaie was happy, sincerely so as she smiled,

“I’m glad you guys survived.”

In addition to Kaie's voice, the voices of Daiya, Haruto, Kino, Kujo and Mashu, who were absent, were also included.

"...Yeah."

At that moment, a strong wind blew by.

The sakuras were very short-lived, thin and fragile, fitting of its image as an illusory flower, they would instantly bloom and wither as quickly. There was no lingering attachment as they left the branches easily and slowly floated to the ground.

Thus, this ominous flower was scorned by warriors who vowed to live.

But the pure flower was also beloved by the warriors who ran to the battlefield with their deaths impending.

The falling flowers wither. The sakura trees were in full bloom, and countless petals fluttered with the wind.

Light as paper, they played around with the air currents and covered their atmosphere in their own colors before they landed.

People call it, falling cherry blossoms.

His field of vision was occupied by the same color, countless petals dancing in the air. *Fuwaah*, the sakuras fluttered with the night breeze, and the whole street was covered by the swirl formed by them.

Kaie and the other comrades disappeared into the darkness, and everything was covered up by the veil of fading petals...

"Captain Nouzen?"

There was a sweet, fresh scent of violets, which he was acquainted with over the past month.

Shin looked back and saw Lena standing under the rain of sakuras. She was wearing the blue uniform of the Republic, and had silver hair and eyes of an Alba.

There was no one under the blooming sakura trees. On the pile of rubble used as a substitute for a table, there was a lacquered cup filled with sake, not touched at all. Shin was sitting there by himself.

There was no one there who would have picked up that cup and drank it all.

A long while had passed since two years ago.

Lena walks down the cracked street, the sound of her high heels spreading throughout, accompanied by a scent of fine perfume that was unbecoming of the ruins that was abandoned eleven years ago.

She was the tactical commander, and Shin was the operations commander. They were both affiliated to the Eighty-Sixth Mobile Strike Package of the Federacy's Western Front, and were deployed here to support the old Republic. The place they were stationed at was a temporary base near the Eastern Front's First Ward front line where Shin was the leader of Spearhead Squadron.

He came alone to this battlefield sealed in darkness, even though he knew it was a violation of military discipline.

"You suddenly disappeared from the barracks, and I wondered where you went...since it's you, I dared to come out since I determined there is no Legion around."

"Sorry about that. I wanted to head back soon, so I didn't feel the need to tell you."

With that, Shin stood up and put the drained cup in his hand next to the untouched one.

"But how did you know that I was here? I thought you wouldn't have known about this place when you never stepped foot here, Colonel."

That aside, perhaps he did mention of this place during the Para-RAID communications back then, but he never did connect here.

"After your Juggernaut disappeared, captain, I went to ask the maintenance crew. They were not sure either, so I asked Lieutenant Shuga."

"...I guess everyone got a loose tongue."

Shin looked towards the Juggernaut Lena had rode on, and Raiden shrugged.

The maintenance crew aside, Raiden should not open up to her.

But given that she was brought here, it seemed Raiden was forced into doing so.

Not noticing the subtle stares between those two, Lena looked up at the beautiful blooming sakuras that seemed to fill the sky.

After a while, *phew*, she could not help but sigh.

"...So pretty."

"Yes...it's as pretty as it was two years ago."

Shin did not look at her silvery white eyes at this moment, but at the scene.

In the still silent darkness, he continued to look at the blooming pale red flowers.

“The whole Spearhead Squadron had been here to enjoy the flowers, when they were assigned to this First Eard two years ago.”

“.....”

The Eighty-Six who had lived long enough would be assigned to this final battlefield, to fight until they died, and mandated to die at the end of their six-month term.

“It was Kaie’s suggestion. All twenty-four members of the squadron were still alive. But back then...”

It was not much different from before, and he squinted his eyes at the sakura trees lined up by the road.

However, most of the people who watched the flowers back then were no longer present. The scene was the only thing that remained unchanged, the blooming sakuras, the bright moon and the darkness.

“It’s a pity about the cups.”

That was something they had exchanged before her demise, but most of the people in the squadron did not know the significance of it.

“Sorry...to have disturbed you.”

“Eh. No, it’s fine.”

He came here just to sweep the graves of his comrades’ non-existent headstones.

When Shin told her it was time to go back, Lena gave an awkward look and nodded. She looked aside at the pair of cups placed on the rubble, and was apprehensive to speak.

Instead, yes, she lowered her little head and sniffed with her nose.

“...I think it smells good.”

Yes, Shin was holding the earthenware container that goes with the sake cups—the Tokkuri.

“Do you want a sip before returning to base? There’s not much left, though.”

“Is it wine...?”

“Said to be from the Far East, Kaie’s hometown.”

“...Woah, there is such a thing...I thought the Federacy has yet to restore diplomatic relations with other countries, right?”

Like the Republic, the Federacy was embargoed by hordes of Legion, and it was only recently that the existence of neighboring countries was confirmed.

The countries have only progressed to the point of human contact, and the Far East has yet to confirm diplomatic relations.

Not to mention the specialty products from there.

The cups were only found after he had scoured all the department stores and antique stores in Sankt Jeder. In the worst case scenario that he could not find any, he would have to replace it with something else.

“It was made by a winery in the southeast of Federacy during its off hours. It’s not really valuable since nobody in the Federacy knows about it, so it’s not worth much. Feels like it’s something of a personal inclination.”

It was placed on the corner of the shelf, collecting dust, and the clerk barely remembered there was such a thing.

Lena showed a wry smile.

“So this was the source of the commotion that came from the cafeteria after I left the base.”

It was larger than the typical wine bottles, and at least double the capacity of the Federacy’s alcohol beverages. It was heavy and unnecessary, so he had given the rest to the members, save for a few cups and the Tokkuri. It seemed everyone was very interested in this.

The Federacy did not prohibit drinking outside of duty hours, and Shin made sure there was no Legion in the vicinity, so he was able to act so brazenly.

“Then, I shall keep you company too...so.”

Ahem. Suddenly, Lena coughed on purpose.

She pointed her finger at Shin and smiled like she had caught him off guard.

“Activate drinking mode, Captain Nouzen.”

Shin could help but give a wry smile.

“I’m the kind of person who can’t get drunk. The Onyx are known for their alcohol tolerance.”

It was said by Ernst—a fellow Onyx who was his official stepfather. In ancient times, the warrior class Onyx had a strong tolerance to drugs containing alcohol.

In fact, Shin, a half-blood Onyx, and Raiden, a pure-blooded Onyx himself, had strong tolerance for alcohol.

Lena's teasing expression instantly disappeared.

"Really? Raiden, is it really okay to drink until you are unconscious?"

"You'll be hated."

"Give me a break."

Both parties ignored the murmuring Raiden.

On a side note, driving after drinking was not illegal in both the Federacy and the Republic, as long as no one was hit.

"So, given the Federacy's laws, you can drink now, no, Captain?"

"No problem if you're sixteen, I reached that two years ago."

"What month and date is that?"

"Someday...in May, I guess?"

He did not remember, since he did not really care about it.

"What should I do if you do not remember...?"

Lena slumped her shoulders and sighed upon this thought.

"Well, we should be headed back to the Federacy. Once we reach the headquarters, place check on it and report to me."

"...I don't mind, but what's the reason for doing so?"

"I have decided."

When she said that, Lena smiled like a blooming flower.

"A birthday party for everyone...let us work hard together."

Volume 5

Dengeki 64

For Crown Prince of the United Kingdom of Roa Gracia Zafar Idinarohk, his brother Viktor ten years younger was too adorable, a brother he had the urge to dote and protect.

Until that moment.

“—Brother.”

When his younger brother said with a childish tone while giving him violet petals torn into pieces, Zafar was the only one who thought he was cute back then.

Children, in particular, were often tempted to pick some beautiful flowers for fun. It would be one thing if such things belonged to them, but the entire place, including the servants' entire livelihoods, belonged to the royal Idinarohk family. Even though a mere common stock was damaged, he would if you damage a violet in the flower bed, will not be reprimanded by the gardener.

Woah, so Zafar exclaimed, and received the things those little hands passed over, *Thank you*, he patted the little head of his brother, praising the petals' praise. The young prince smiled happily; he was truly so endearing back then.

He would pat his brother's little head without fail without consideration, even if it was a plucked butterfly wing, a fallen goldbug wing, or an odd thing like a beautiful feather or a snake scale that clearly were not simply picked up, he wouldn't think anything of it and would just stroke his little brother's head.

Until.

“Brother, look at this.”

Zafar could not smile anymore when his smiling little brother handed over a blue kitten's eyeball with his two hands.

It was only then that he came to his senses.

So that was it.

The child was a snake.

SY 2150

United Kingdom of Roa Gracia Southern Front

At this moment, the battlefield of the United Kingdom of Roa Gracia was shrouded by the seven veils of the Wailing Goddess.

The Wailing Goddess wore pure immaculate white veils of ice veil, and a pale, dark gown. Against the darkness of the opposite two colors, she danced wildly like a frenzied princess, dazzling and bewildering all who saw her. Thus was the black and white battlefield of the United Kingdom, where all sense of direction and distance was gone, and even the targeting laser of the fire control system could be deceived.

Beyond the veil, the steel-colored silhouettes of Legion seemingly appeared out of a sudden as they swarmed towards the defences United Kingdom army.

Beneath the steel hooves of Legion, the steel anti-tank barriers at the front that took the form of spears, frozen trenches, and Tochkas that were colored the same as the snow had all collapsed, buried along with the lurking soldiers, assault rifles, recoilless cannons, old anti-tank rifles. Even the United Kingdom's Barushka Matushka, decapedaled Feldreß with enhanced artillery, were crushed in their attempts to stop the enemy.

A horde of Löwes raced forward. Even in the hillscape of thick snow, the large monsters of fifty tons in battle weight continued to push forward with ridiculous speed.

At that moment,

“—Fufu.”

A girl's hearty laughter echoed in the blurry white.

The laughter was sufficiently subtle, hard to hear through the howling snowstorm. However, there were many footsteps that accompanied it. The Ameise tracking alongside the Legion caught sight of distinctive spiked footsteps through its composite sensor, along with the distinct, hard sounds made when walking through the frozen land.

The Legion could identify the name and specs of the unit if the footsteps were compared to the database. The matching result was a multi-legged fighter of the United Kingdom. Based on the intel shared, the turrets of the Löwes started to turn silently.

It seemed she too had noticed the savage expressions of the Löwes targeted at her, but she did not mind..

Beyond the snowy night the Legion looked at was seemingly the military headquarters of the United Kingdom, and suddenly, a pale white fighter unit leaped out.

Like a coyote through the snow, she ran between the narrow gaps of the coniferous forest like a carnivore moving in the winter where its prey had difficulty moving. She let out laughter of a demure girl tapping on glass as she ran through the white-blue battlefield.

The decapedal fighter had five pairs of slender legs, and a fancy cockpit that might not exist. A hazy light appeared between the snow veil, and it was the glow from the optical sensors that were pale as ghost fire.

The Alkonost was a multi-legged fighter tasked to defend the United Kingdom.

The fighter scampered in all directions to avoid the first salvo from the Löwes. The shell fragments were incapable of damaging it, but it leapt with ridiculous maneuverability, jumped above the turret of the front-most Löwe, and wrapped itself around it like a vulture.

“Ufufu.”

“Ahahaha.”

The untimely female laughter was followed by a literal zero-range barrage.

The fighters were lightened to ensure high maneuverability, and thus, the cannon caliber was reduced to a short type of 105mm. The combat maneuverability of the Alkonost was thus to compensate for the cannon’s lack of accuracy of the gun’s aim with a close-range barrage.

The shell exploded almost immediately near the muzzle, and the metal torrent eroded the upper armor of the Löwe through the Munroe effect.

At the same time, the shell fragments scattered in all directions, piercing the armor around the long, thin legs and torso of the Alkonost.

The HEAT shell that hit the Löwe had its power set to the minimum range to ensure that the multi-legged unit would not be damaged by the shockwaves and shrapnel caused by the explosion. At this point however, the directive was lost abandoned—it was a blast up close to destroy the enemy, even if it meant damaging her own unit.

Even so, the pilot inside the Alkonost—who might be a girl, would not stop. The Löwe that was detonated by the shell spewed flames, and the turret was blown away by the impact. It took the scrapped enemy as a springboard and leaped onto the next Legion (prey). The other Alkonost units that appeared in the snowy field one after another trailed behind and trampled on the steel-colored wreckage.

Sensing that the defensive line had been breached, the United Kingdom's Feldreß, the Barushka Matushka vanguard squadron, stood under the light.

Beneath under the snowy sky were the steel-colored silhouettes of countless Legion units, and the pale white spiders that surrounded them and hunted them down.

At this time, a pale white figure appeared in front of them, who were watching the battlefield in half-awe.

There were one—no, two units. One of them was an Alkonost with a white sea bird Personal Mark, while the other was a Barushka Matushka. The massive decapedaled unit was equipped with 125mm smoothbore guns, grenade launchers lined side by side, heavy armor and heavy armament that resembled a demonic city, heavy looking. It was a multi-legged fighter with enhanced artillery.

The Personal Mark was a serpent wrapped around an apple.

The call sign was Gadyuka. It was the personal unit of Viktor Idinarohk, the fifth prince of the United Kingdom and commander-in-chief of the Southern Front.

The United Kingdom revered martial arts, and the Idinarohk royalty were the apex of it all, taking pride in commanding armies into battle. This prince too seemed to exhibit so as he stood on the frontlines in his multi-legged fighter.

The distinctive blue and white optical sensors of the United Kingdom's multi-legged fighter glanced toward the mech squadron. It was as if a beautiful black serpent was eyeing its prey with merciless eyes.

“—Is the commander present?”

It was difficult for the pilots of the mecha unit to identify the sweet, musical tenor voice that rang through the noise of the radio.

The tone of voice was one used to giving speeches, and could draw people's consciousness into the abyss. It came from a teenage boy who had yet to be an adult.

How could it be Prince himself who asked the question?

The squadron commander, who was frozen for a moment, regained his senses and replied in a different, almost opposite tone. He was merely a junior officer, and talking to the royal family directly was by no means a reward.

“Yes...o-over.”

“My Sirins will buy time. Focus on rebuilding the defense line.”

“As you wish.”

But did he really hear the commander’s reply? While speaking, the Serpent directed his optical sensors away from them, and moved his massive machine after the Alkonosts which had disappeared into the snow—it was a tradition for the Idinarohk royal family to appear on the frontlines. He probably intended to take command before the defense line collapsed.

At the same time, he was controlling the machine without words, tailing the Alkonost with the Personal Mark of the sea bird like a shadow.

The squadron pilots silently watched him leave in awe and a hint of displeasure.

The pilots of Alkonost, whom the prince called Sirins, were all young girls. They were all birds of death that feared no death for the sake of the royal decree, including the girl with the Personal Mark of the sea bird he followed.

It was a commonly known fact that the fifth prince and his troops were the main point of defense of the United Kingdom. To the soldiers who knew that this feat was built on the wreckage of countless Alkonost, his great work could only be described as unnerving.

While looking in the direction of where the units disappeared into the snow, one of the pilots could not help but utter what was on his mind.

The leader of the Sirins Battalion, so beautiful it was terrifying—

“—The Serpent of Shackles and Decay.”

“...I suppose he assumed I did not hear him.”

Royalty he might be, they were in the midst of the battle, and it was a battlefield.

After the battle, Viktor—Vika handed over the damaged unit to the maintenance crew, and walked around without being greeted by an attendant in the hangar full of crude multipedaled units that focused only on sturdiness and functionality. He was wearing a purple and black mecha pilot’s suit that was no different from the United Kingdom’s normal pilots, and had black kite-like hair and amethyst eyes like a tiger. The only difference between him and the general military was the unicorn silver plate that symbolized the royal seal of authority on the insignia badge. Unlike the general officers who were only granted a portion of their command, he was able to exercise the command he had as a royal. Such was the proof of ‘special general’.

The only girl accompanying him as a knight looked towards him with her beryl green eyes, and asked,

“What do you wish to do, Your Highness?”

It was as if she would obey immediately if ordered to behead someone, happily even. Such was the tone she spoke with as she looked towards Vika.

She was like a hound with only one thing on her mind, cautious and straightforward.

Like a blind follower.

Hmph, Vika snorted.

Responding indifferently, he said,

“A crass dog is barking, but I have no intent to pursue every single one and beat them up. I have neither the pettiness nor the time to do so, Lerche.”

Just give up.

“...Yes.”

Lerche reluctantly nodded her head. Seeing her look of defiance, Vika snickered at her.

“We have insufficient soldiers, and while they are lacking in etiquette, it doesn’t matter as long as they can fight the Legion. We’ll use what we have...there’s no need to punish such painless insolence.”

“Still affected by the prior attack?”

“...Yes. At least we have an option other than to retreat.”

The United Kingdom used the Dragon Corpse Mountains, a natural obstacle, as the main battlefield in the war against the Legion, and placed the northern side of the mountains, which overlap the north and south, as an absolute defense line. The south was supposedly occupied by the Legion, and both sides remained hostile against each other across the valley and lowlands.

Since ancient times, it was tougher to attack from the low ground, especially a treacherous rolling mountainous terrain that was not beneficial towards the Feldreß that mainly fought on the plains. The hilly country Alliance of Wald, centered around the range surrounding Mount Wyrmnest, built their multipedaled weapons based on the Legion out of national security concerns, and were no different from the United Kingdom in this regard.

The United Kingdom maintained a defense line for eleven years, and to a certain extent it was successful in the south, but it also showed that the United Kingdom was merely a battlefield ‘attacking from the high ground’.

They suffered many losses in defence facilities and soldiers under the prior major offensive. The United Kingdom army had yet to recover, and was trying its best not to retreat, mentioned.

The United Kingdom, which had the northern part of the continent, could not retreat any further. Beyond the Dragon Corpse Mountains would be the largest farming stretch of the United Kingdom. The northern half of the United Kingdom’s territory was unsuitable for food production due to sunlight and temperature, so the southern farming areas was the lifeline of the United Kingdom.

They could not let it be consumed by war.

Lerche asked,

“We can’t build an elite squadron like the Federacy, the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package, can we?”

Vika glanced at her and looked down at the snowy-white face that was the lower half of her head. *The Eighty-Sixth Strike Package, huh?*

“An advanced force comprised mainly of the Eighty-Six with the mission to prioritize the Legion...well, I can’t say it can’t be done...”

He paused for a moment and shrugged at Lerche, who was tilting her head.

“Create another squadron? Father and Brother will seek other methods, so...”

At that moment, a sergeant in a purple and black uniform stood before the two.

“Your Highness.”

The sergeant saluted with honorifics—it was the heart salute distinct to the United Kingdom Army, where the right hand was placed on the heart.

It was not a royal salute, but it was used as a military salute in the battlefield, and it meant an order to not only Vika, but to all royalty and soldiers. This ostentatious ritual was merely a waste of time on the battlefield, where time was of the essence.

“What is it...you have permission. Keep it short.”

“Yes. Your Highness, I have been ordered to recall you. It is from your father, His Majesty the King.”

Vika did not look back at Lerche, who was looking up at him, but merely raised a neat single eyebrow.

“I heard that Viktor had been summoned from the southern side, Brother Zafar.”

He knew it was rude to do so, but Zafar stopped in his tracks and looked back. The main hallway of the Roa Gracia palace was inlaid with gold leaves, amber, topaz and heliodor, creating a brilliant, warm golden glow in the faint northern sunlight.

Slowly carrying the hem of the hand-wove gown were the identical-looking twin attendants as his half-sister, the first princess who was younger by half a month. The rich fragrant aroma that arose was the jasmine perfume, made from flowers that could be smelled from far away, which only the greenhouses of the United Kingdom could cultivate.

With a clatter, she unfolded her fan of ivory and gemstone fan, gracefully covered her smiling face and continued,

“Father and Brother, you two finally wish to see that monster...those Sirins are in the southern forces of the army, and are such unnatural troops after all. I guess it cannot be helped if they cannot repel the Legion.”

Zafar could not help but laugh.

He was born to the queen, while the first princess and the second prince were born to other concubines. They were fighting for the throne, vying for accomplishments, but such sarcastic digs that seemed cute were pointless, and a waste of time.

“Is it that bad? For seven years, he has stopped those steel monsters in the Dragon Corpse mountains. During the prior slaying of the Railgun, Vika led the Sirins in ballistic observation and infiltration destruction, and was highly lauded by Father.”

As long as approval was given, it was possible that Vika, whose succession rights were removed, could make a comeback, but Zafar did not mention so.

Assuming the youngest brother Vika regained his position as heir to the throne—he would certainly be the most formidable enemy to whomever...of course, this would include Zafar, but the latter firmly believed this would not be the case.

The child of Snakes was truly not interested in authority or power.

The reason was the world he was in—...

“This summons is to change the situation where we had to retreat from the defensive line. Or rather, Father would expect to task that child with the mission to suppress the Legion...I suppose you have heard the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package that had been assisting us.”

“The Eighty-Sixth Strike Package? ...Ah yes, the garbage heap unit consisting of the Eighty-Six from the Federacy that was seized by fervent plebeians that even the wretched Republic has abandoned.”

Oho, the first Princess showed an elegant smile.

“That army is suitable for him, but you are assigning your own biological brother there??Truly you and Father do not have a long term view of this, Brother. Are you intending to discard them after using them? Those forces are established to ensure that their country’s people were not sacrificed.”

“But it is a necessity.”

This country, the United Kingdom, was ruled by a unicorn royal family. His Father was on the throne, while Zafar himself would one day inherit it.

Despite this, she had stubbornly took Zafar’s abandonment of Vika as a trip up, and Zafar himself thought it was really her faction that had sent Vika to the Strike Package. Or perhaps it was the concoction of the second prince’s faction, and she tagged along. Nevertheless, the two would not stop coercing their younger siblings who were not much younger than them.

Both the First Princess and the Second Princess deemed that Vika, who belonged to Zafar’s faction, never regretted the loss of his succession rights, and pinned his own accomplishments onto Zafar, was a major obstacle. They wanted to seize the chance to dispose of Vika. If the latter contributed greatly with the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package, the credit would undoubtedly have been given to Zafar.

The United Kingdom no longer has the luxury of keeping Vika on the defensive line. Rather, one would say he and his Sirins would only shine in combat.

Despite this, Zafar felt it was unforgivable.

“Does that Serpent still obeys?”

“Of course. That child is a loyal sword to Father and I, along with the United Kingdom we defend. As long as Father or I give the command, he shall protect this country...even if means giving up his own life.”

His Father shall know his own limits, along with that of the United Kingdom's. That youngest brother would forever be a sharp sword for the United Kingdom.
“...”

Phew, there was a sense of elegance from the fan fanned by the First Princess.

“Brother, a word of advice to you...it is best not to rely on that Serpent too heavily. There is suitable prey for a hunting dog to work on, but he is ultimately a humanoid monster born without being able to comprehend human emotions. Even if he does take the throne, he is a merciless monster that remains nonchalant about the honor that comes with it...there is nothing tougher to handle than a shackled monster. You have no idea what this savage serpent is thinking, or which he will bite you. The best way is to let go of him.”

Unlike those who were raised with money, honor and authority...nobody knew how to raise an emotionless serpent.

Hmph, Zafar sneered elegantly.

“You are envious, no, Feodora?”

Zafar saw that the beautiful face of his younger sister was gloomy.

It seemed her mettle was still lacking, and Zafar coldly responded with a perfect smile.

Since young, they were taught as royalty to never show others of what they were truly thinking.

He was dealing with an opponent coveting the throne, and it would be terrible if he did not put in some effort on his appearance and showed his heart.

While smiling, he looked down at her as he continued on,

“He is just a hunting dog close to Father and me. A beautiful, sharp sword, an irreplaceable fang of a venomous snake...and you always loved pretty dolls, no?”

She was miles away compared to Vika and the beautiful dolls who always looked so tentative behind her, lacking in class and heinous.

“...Who cares about that filthy serpent?”

Feodora said with a tone of slight regret, and she lifted her long eyebrows, her emerald eyes looking up at him. She and her biological brother were different from Zafar, who had a pair of amethyst eyes.

Of their eyes, the ones deemed best were amethyst, and of the siblings, only Zafar and Vika inherited them.

“Speaking of which, I cannot understand why you are so doting on him. While he may be a serpent, he is still Father’s own son. As a brother though, he did cause the Queen, your mother—”

“I thought you wanted to say something else. Is it not a given to dote on my little brother, Feodora?”

Zafar sneered.

Unlike you, who only has Father’s blood.

That was the tone of his unspoken words in the face of his half-sister.

Even if he was the cold-blooded child of Serpents.

Even if he was the Serpent who devoured his kin to survive, whose flesh and blood had rotted away.

“He is still...my adorable little brother after all.”

Before he knew it, it had been a long while ago until he knew of the true nature of his little brother, and subsequently,

Ever since then,

That moment when the gouged eye retained its clear blue and remained still, even though it was stained from the blood.

Zafar recovered, and smiled at his infant little brother.

The little brother who was still three years young, born from the same mother.

“Vika, why did you think of bringing this to me?”

Vika blinked his wide blue eyes, and smiled innocent,

“Because it’s pretty!”

“...I see.”

So that was the case. The kitten’s eye was a pretty blue, and so were the petals of the violets, the wings of the butterfly and the goldenbug, bird feather, snake scale and others. That was why he would gift them to his ‘dearest brother’.

“Did that cat not suffer...whimper or scream?”

“It did.”

“I see. Do not do this again.”

“Why?”

Vika asked incredulously, and Zafar pondered.

“Well, you hate to be hurt, do you not, Vika? Nobody wants to be hurt, and hate to be hurt. At the same time, do not do something to be hated.”

“But why? I’m not a cat...the cat would feel pain, but not it.”

...Truly.

Ahh goodness, Zafar brooded.

It seemed that in his little brother’s world, he was the only existence.

There was only Vika...or to those he felt a need to maintain a relationship with, his father, Zafar himself, the milk mother and the milk sister girl were all important to him. To him, he simply needed to protect himself, and nothing else mattered, and he did not care if anything else existed.

But if it kept up.

If he could more or less convey his words—Zafar truly wished that Vika would establish contact with people aside from him.

“Vika. ‘I’ do not like it when a cat is suffering and tormented.”

The large purple eyes blinked and flickered.

“You dislike so, Brother?”

“Did you not look for pretty things to make me happy? Since I dislike them, you cannot do them, Vika.”

“...Yes.”

“Look, I do not like to see cats tormented. Do not do this again, starting today, Vika.”

If not.

If Vika were to show complete disinterest in anything aside from himself or those related to him, he would easily be a target of scorn.

Zafar could not allow that to happen.

“...”

The young Vika pondered seriously with the thought process befitting his age.

“...The cat doesn’t want to be hurt, Brother dislike it. I can’t do anything that Brother dislikes.”

It seemed he understood.

Vika lowered his shoulders dejected.

“Sorry.”

He did not apologize for harming the cat.

Zafar himself did not think that harming the cat itself was a bad thing though.

“Yes. I shall not do so again.”

One had to wonder if that pitiful cat was still alive. If it was, Zafar wanted to personally raise it.

Since such a sin was committed, some compensation was required.

Suddenly, as Zafar was about to turn and look for the cat, a little hand tugged at him.

“O’er there,”

Zafar looked back at Vika, who was trying to conjure words.

Given the tense look, it was obvious Vika did not want to be hated.

Vika’s world consisted only of him and some other people who were important to him.

No matter who left...it would mean to Vika that he would lose part of himself. A world with only himself was more terrifying than anything else.

“Is it because I can’t do that, not because you hate it? Then can I continue to give things to you, Brother?”

“Yes...Vika.”

Despite the cat’s blood on his hand, Zafar wrapped the eye that was starting to turn murky, and held Vika’s little hand as he kept pace, saying,

“From now on, you must remember that your thoughts will be different from others, and you will probably encounter such situations. Until then, remember to ask me. If you do anything wrong, I shall teach you...and have you understand.”

That was how he learned to raise this humanoid Serpent.

One day, Vika would grow fangs, but one would hope he would not deliberately destroy the world.

Zafar hoped that the world would not deem his brother a threat and shun him.

He would guide Vika, for he was the older brother of this child.

For Zafar, his brother Viktor ten years younger was too adorable, a brother he had the urge to dote and protect.

Since then,

At this moment.

Vika, who was assigned to the Eighty-Sixth Mobile Strike Package under the Federal Republic of Giad, had removed his insignia as a special general and swapped to that of a lieutenant colonel

Zafar was brewing tea, and as the smell of his favorite sagebrush-scented black tea wafted through the air, someone suddenly spoke,

“...Speaking of which, Brother.”

Zafar felt a sense of foreboding from the eighteen-year-old younger brother who spoke up,

Oh dear,

It had been a while, and perhaps the taste did not suit Vika.

But in any case, Vika’s expression was always exactly the same as when he gave violet petals and a cat’s eye as a child.

He tried to ask the reason as to why Vika did not continue,

“What is it, Vika?”

There was a common grey cat with one eye in the Crown Prince’s room, lying on Vika’s lap, seemingly forgetting who caused that injury as it poked Vika with its paw.

Till this day, Zafar had no idea if Vika knew that he caused such a tragedy.

“I actually read an interesting thesis and thought I’d try an experiment...”

Hmm.

Surely that thesis contained weird stuff that could not be done.

Of course, Vika, who had no idea as to what was in Zafar’s mind, could not help but project the thesis onto the holographic screen.

“It’s a technology that enables mice and rabbits to emit fluorescence by controlling their genetic factors. I don’t know if the same technology can be applied to other creatures, so I want to try it out. I don’t care about the rest, as long as the snake can emit a full spectrum of light. If it is beautiful, I will give one to you, Brother...”

“Vika.”

Immediately after the reply, Vika slumped his shoulders dejectedly.

“Can’t I...?”

“No.”

It was fine to play with animals, but not fine to play animals. Zafar had repeated this for the umpteenth time.

Speaking of which, while Zafar did say that dogs, cats, birds, horses, butterflies, frogs and fish were a no go, he never mentioned anything about snakes.

“So, what about a lizard...”

“No.”

“.....”

The little brother who had a weird thought process went silent with a gaudy look for some reason.

Is there anything bothering you? Zafar wanted to ask, but he did not.

Vika really could not understand Zafar’s values, and Zafar could not fully understand Vika’s values either.

But why could he not? The situation remained unchanged no matter how many times Zafar reproached him, and it did not make sense at all. sense at all.

Vika never said he understood either...having grown up, he realized that he was a heretic in the human world, and had reached a point where no one can understand.

“I caught the parents of that snake...”

“Let them go. Into the garden.”

On a side note, for Zafar and Vika, who were born and raised in the vast palace of Roa Gracia, the ‘garden’ referred to here was as vast as a dense forest.

Vika thought about it again.

“Understood. I shall gift this to the commander of the Mobile Strike Package.”

“Why did it come to that. Can you not put it in the garden?”

Vika tilted his head.

“The Reaper of the Republic’s Eighty-Sixth District is like a snake, probably tough to handle too, I suppose?”

“Maybe...”

Zafar too had heard about the teenage soldiers of the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package—and like Vika, the Eighty-Six too were missing something. They were like snakes, no matter how good they were, they would be discarded after being used.

The Federacy had released the photo of the commander leading the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package, one with bloody pupils that would render any viewer awake. Zafar reminiscence as he continued,

“I do not think he will be happy, so your expected reaction might not happen. It is not funny to joke like this. Do not cause any pranks.”

“The tactical commander and the mascot of the Strike Package might show some interesting reactions. Will it be fine?”

“...”

Zafar, who sighed, said,

“Stop playing pranks that will get you completely hated.”

As long as Brother doesn't hate it, it doesn't matter.

Zafar expected Vika to say that, but Vika actually thought about it for a moment.

“...Understood. Then forget it.”

Ohh, Zafar widened his eyes.

And suddenly smiled.

“I see. Then everything will be fine.”

Fifteen years had passed since then.

The child of Serpents was still unable to understand human kindness and decency, but perhaps he was starting to be accustomed to communication, and closer to people as a result.

Shin's Situation

They got their base back, but Shin, as the battalion commander of the Strike Package, had lots of things to handle. For example, he had to contact and affirm the status of the containment forces, clear up the enemies in the base, and report to his superiors.

Once these were done, he returned to his room to change, and was completely worn out.

As they were surrounded by thick granite, the heat rising from underground had engulfed the sealed interior of the base, warm unlike the snowy day outside. Perhaps due to this, the sudden fatigue left him a little groggy. The surrounding Legion were nowhere close to being a threat within a short period of time. He was sure of this after a period of time.

He could no longer hear the cries of the Legion, or the Lerche.

“...”

He removed the heavy Panzer jacket, and reached out for the remaining Federacy steel-colored uniform Frederica had folded and brought to him.

The air in the room flowed slowly, and a nauseating, bloody, foul stench entered his nostrils.

The casualties suffered over the three days of fighting was intense, the dead still left within the base, the Strike Package still moving the corpses. In the meantime, once the containment forces returned, their dead would be joining in. The base's ventilation systems were yet to be repaired to the bare minimum, and the corpses' stench would not leave for the time being.

Despite that, he had no other thoughts.

He got used to the smell quickly, not just at this moment, but for before. The bloody stench of the wounded and the rotting stench of the corpses no longer existed, and all that lingered was the faint scent of blood and organs.

He wore the dark shirt, buttoned it all the way to his collar, eschewing the tie as he slipped the jacket on. Even in this dark environment, he could see the distinct bloodred tie of the Federacy.

He did not want anyone to see the scar on his neck, except when military regulations required him to show it. He would typically hide it with a tie and collar,

even though he was bad at doing that. He did have difficulties breathing at times, even though he was not actually asphyxiating.

The scar was caused by his brother, and till this day, he did not want to recall that scene.

He shook his head, and put on his coat. The scar was a little higher than the collar of an ordinary suit, and thus he wanted to button it.

Suddenly, a rich scent of flowers washed away the foul stench.

It was the floral fragrance of an early blooming spring, signifying the passing of winter.

It was not a completely natural smell. One could sense it was made from synthesizing other fragrances.

It had a refreshingly sweet scent, the scent of perfume.

Eh, Shin widened his eyes.

The coat had the shoulder patch of the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package and the emblem of the armor corps. It also had the only captain rank insignia, which meant it was his uniform.

But despite that.

He never realized that his hushed words and blinking red eyes were showing panic, like magic going out of control.

“...This smell is...”

The violet perfume Lena uses...?

Lena's Situation

They got their base back, but Lena, as the tactical commander of the Strike Package, had lots of things to handle.

The incidents ended. The only ones left in the Command Room were Vika, Frederica, Marcel and some others. Lena was slumped in her chair. It was tiring, as expected of her role.

Suddenly, she remembered something, and stood upright immediately.

“Right, the uniform...!”

She was referring to the uniform top she had borrowed when using the Cicada. The Federacy's steel-colored men's shirt. The battle was over, and she had to hurry and return it.

Frederica however gave a mystified look.

“Eh? Was it not returned?”

Saying that, she pointed a finger elsewhere.

At the ajar door of the Command Room, one could see Shin's Panzer Jacket walking down the corridor outside as he prepared to change into his uniform.

...*Eh?*

Lena's mind immediately went blank, and Vika nonchalantly went into the space between her and the entrance. It appeared she had not realized Shin's arrival, not from his footsteps at least, for the latter had a habit of not making a sound when he walked.

The Federacy's steel colored male shirt.

The uniform was a foot larger than hers in size, and also emphasized how skinny and diminutive she was. The owner of the uniform should be a tall, lanky boy.

For some reason, she had a sense of relief.

In other words.

“Eh,”

Marcel, having realized what was going on, immediately closed the door.

“Ehhhyyyyyyaaaaaa!?”

The supposedly thick anti-blast doors probably were not closed that quickly, but it seemed so to her. The next moment, Lena's shriek echoed throughout the Command Room.

As it was too embarrassing, the Bloody Reina was truly beetroot. Frederica quietly giggled.

"Finally realized, fool?"

"Huh? Frederica, that is your ploy, no!?"

"A ploy, you say? An unpleasant way of putting it. Locksnake and those fellows too know you are interested in him."

"Eh, interested about what..."

"Oh, is it not? How strange. You seemed interested in Shinei's uniform."

"Enouuuuggghhhh! Nnnnoooo—!"

Vika looked on with astonishment and sympathy.

"Speaking of which, it is obvious by the rank the insignia. Have you not noticed its position?"

The uniform displayed an eight horse insignia of the Mobile Forces and a Captain rank. Shin was the only person in the Strike Package with this combination.

"Then...has everyone realized this?"

Vika nodded calmly, while Marcel discreetly averted his eyes.

"Errmmm. Probably...everyone in the Command Room has noticed it."

"Uuuu...!?"

Lena was about to start screaming, only to nearly pass out from the embarrassment.

"Frederica, you...!"

Upon seeing her being all teary, Frederica showed a malicious smirk.

This bit of revenge should be forgivable, at least.

"Look at that face of yours. Really, the wish I have to take a photo and show Shinei."

Everyone's Playing in the Snow

The Kingdom of Roa Gracia was a country in the North, said to be loved by the Snow Goddess.

The winter was long, half a year or so, and the snowfall was massive compared to the neighboring southern countries, the Republic of San Magnolia and the old territory of the Federal Republic of Giad.

And so,

“Amazing...it is all white no matter where I look...!”

“Thy suppose that would be thy line, no...never expected such an open place next to us so abnormally quiet.”

Lena's eyes glittered like a child's as she looked around at the snow field, while the actual child Frederica sideeyed her dumbfoundedly.

She dressed in a coat and hat over her usual uniform, did not notice this look as she ran around the vast snow field, looking around.

In any case, she certainly had the vibe of a puppy, or a kitten, who had seen snow for the first time.

“What? Had thou not played with snow in the Republic?”

“Liberté et Égalité does not have much snow...I do remember that my father and uncle once built a snowman for me.”

“...No wonder.”

It seemed Lena was more inexperienced than Frederica had assumed.

Frederica recalled the time when she played hide and seek with her escorts totalling ten and more while at Rozenfort, and the snowball fights with Shin and the others at Ernst's residence in Sankt Jeder.

On a side note, the Federacy's capital Sankt Jeder was a hundred kilometers or so away from the Republic's capital Liberté et Égalité, and had lots of snowfall every year.

Humph, so she folded her arms and snorted.

They were at the frontlines of the Kingdom, Levich base. The Legion showed no activity on this day, and Lerche did once mention that they could have fun near the base.

Despite being the commander, it was to be expected that Lena wanted to relax a little during her free time.

“In that case, perhaps a snowman?”

“Certainly! Let us do it!”

“...Erm, how are you going about with it? Maybe something resembling that mysterious colored alien in that movie we saw?”

“No can do...!”

Lena gave a brooding frown, and Frederica tilted her head as she pondered, so Theo suggested that they build the snowman based on the being they saw in that horror movie. They rolled and expanded the snowball without much thought, and there was an expression created by their clumsy handiwork.

Well.

Lena and Frederica put a decoration resembling a tie, or a collar, or a scarf, and nobody knew what in the world they were doing thereafter.

These two clumsy queens could only make something without any idea of how it would look, and ended up creating something completely different.

Theo sighed as he saw how Lena finally got a chance to play in the snow, and yet give a childish devastated look.

She had put on a muffler as she was a little fearful of the cold, and her warm exhale quickly cooled.

“Anyway, I’ll draw something. Just a wait a sec.”

A snowman required the following, snow, shovel, bucket, twigs, black round stones, some rotten carrot from the cooks at the base’s kitchen, and a blueprint.

“...Do we need a blueprint just to build a snowman? We just need to build a normal one.”

“Can you say that after seeing what those two just made, Raiden?”

Theo was holding a tablet in one hand, and Raiden chimed in as he peered from behind. Lena and Frederica did as Theo instructed, looking for clean snow and piling them in snowballs.

And Raiden went silent upon hearing that retort.

“Ah...well, they look like some skull collection...”

“If that’s what they’re intending to do, that’d be amazing.”

“Well, they’re using a stuffed doll as a reference, just a few different parts.”

After all, they did once witness a stuffed animal with a stitched eye in Frederica’s room.

Done, Lena put the large pile of snowballs onto the original snowball, and looked around.

Thanks to Theo’s instructions, the clumsy girl finally managed to convert snow into a ball, and she herself enjoyed this process.

It was a pity, she suddenly remembered a certain person who was not present.

Unlike her usual state as a commander, she was pouting like a child instead.

“Theo, this should be fine, no!?”

“Ah, yeah, Frederica, yours is about done too...give her a hand, Raiden. I fear that I’d be slaughtered if I do this alone.”

“Sure.”

Shall we call in that idiot? Theo shook his head to purge that notion. They would leave the rest for later.

Theo hoped he would not be angry.

“Almost done, I suppose? Yes, does it not resemble Shin-kun?”

Anju handed over a pale blue muffler.

“Also, some gloves.”

Kurena said as she stabbed some twigs on the snowman, slipped gloves on, and the snowman’s hands were done.

To ensure that the snowman looked decent, the snowman had a face and a collar.

Lena, Frederica and Kurena yapped away as they made this snowman resembling Shin, and Anju watched by the side, marveling so, while Theo looked at the blueprint.

“What’s with that muffler? It looks the same.”

“It was white, but magic happened, Kurena-chan.”

“Ahh.”

The actual scarf was in Shin’s room, and surprising Kurena was able to draw it as per her memory, a little too well in fact.

So Anju tilted her head slightly.

The pebbles eyes, the twig eyebrows and mouth, the carrot nose, the bucket hat, a muffler, the intricate snowman was made.

“Maybe we should call Shin-kun over. Anyway, what is he doing?”

Kurena adjusted the gloves, and said,

“He got summoned by the prince for some reason. Shouldn’t be anything big though.”

“——Achoo.”

Shin was at the meeting room in the observatory block with Vika, discussing matters. Vika then looked outside the window for the strange reason of wanting a change of moods, and smiled. Most of the base was underground, but even then, he hoped for a meeting room where he could witness the outside scenery.

“What is it?”

“Nothing.”

So Vika answered while smiling,

Shin stood from his seat, only to be waved off with one hand like a dog being shooed.

“Ah, you do not have to see it now. It is never too late to see the completed thing.”

“.....?”

“Lerche, you have a recording camera, right? Bring it over.”

“Certainly.”

Lerche too giggled for some reason after looking out of the window, and left.

Shin saw her leave, and asked her master.

“What?”

“It’s pointless to explain, but you really are a blockhead.....ah yes,”

Vika pulled down the curtains to conceal the outside scenery, shrugged, and went to the door, indicating so.

“They should be about done. This shall be all for today. Have a look outside.”



86

— エイゼンタックス —
An anime-style logo with the text "エイゼンタックス" (Aizentakusu) in a stylized font, flanked by horizontal lines.

Gamers Bonus

“—This is my report, Colonel Millizé.”

“Good work, Captain Nouzen...this is tiring.”

They had retaken their base, and were in a room in the temporary office when Lena, who was prone on the desk, smiled bitterly. It was already lights out, but the operations commander Shin and the tactical commander Lena had many other things to deal with. They had spent countless times making reports and meeting, and hardly had any time for any small talk.

Lena stood up and stretched.

She picked up the teapot, poured some of its contents into a paper cup, and handed it over.

“If you do not mind...it seems you have been tense for quite a while.”

“Yes...”

Shin agreed so. While he was not unaware of it, it was to a point where Lena could see it on his face.

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay. Even I would feel tired after a battle like that.”

The paper cup Lena handed over was filled with clear red-colored tea. It had a chemical-like fragrance. This was the instant tea that was part of the United Kingdom army’s field rations.

Seeing that, Shin chuckled quietly.

“You can’t brew tea yet?”

Hmph, Lena pouted.

“Sorry about that, but this is all I can do. Although...”

She said, suddenly sensing something, and her silvery voice grew weaker.

“This hot water...was freshly boiled in the kitchen.”

The corners of Shin’s mouth rose up, and he turned away, before laughing while huffing his shoulders.

Even he did not realize that he was naturally smiling for the first time ever since the end of the siege.

Lena, who saw this, giggled as well.

The moment the tea was cooled to the appropriate temperature, Shin paused and took a sip. He then tilted his head.

“How does it taste?”

“...Very sweet. Too much.”

It was a little unacceptable hard for Shin, who disliked sweets. He could not help but frown.

Lena, who was giggling, picked up her own cup and poured a little too. She took a sip like a little bird.

“Yes. It is too sweet.”

The calorie intake of field rations was meant to be high for the United Kingdom army, given their main battlefield that were the cold snowfields. Surely the sweet tea must be part of it.

“The tea is filled with jam. I guess that the United Kingdom sometimes does that, too, right?”

“I asked the United Kingdom army’s maintenance crew before the battle started, but there isn’t such a tradition in the core culture of the United Kingdom. They do boil fruits and flowers in sugar and put them in teabags though.”

“Is that so...too bad.”

For some reason, Lena was a little reluctant as she gaze at the deep red water surface.

For Shin, he could not fathom how it would taste after adding more sweetness to this already sweet liquid. Frederica too was the same. Perhaps there was a different in tolerance for sweetness between men and women.

“Shin, which do you prefer? Coffee or tea?”

Shin, who had been asked, was deep in thought.

On the other hand, he did not dislike it per say.

“I’m used to drinking coffee. Well, either one is just a substitute.”

Coffee beans and tea leaves originate from the south and east areas of the continent. Given that they were disconnected by the large group of electromagnetic interference of the Legion, the fates of the countries there remained unknown.

Unlike the synthetically engineered substitute tea made through the production facilities, coffee was a substitute easily accessible to the Eighty-Six, including Shin. Thus, this was the reason why they have a slight preference to coffee.

“I guess so...I cannot remember how coffee originally tasted like.”

She gave a faint, bitter smile. Lena was only about seven years old when the war against the Legion started. She did not like the bitter coffee or the uniquely astringent tea.

Shin had no recollection of what he liked either.

“...One day, I want to know which is the one you truly prefer...until then.”

Lena, holding a paper cup in both hands and gazing at the red water, smiled.

She looked like she was praying, as though looking into the distance somewhere.

“In any case, I have to learn how to brew it well too.”

Toranoana Bonus

They had retaken their base, and the surrounding area was as snowy as ever, or to be precise, very cold.

Lena, who appeared in such a place, was dressed in thin uniform shirt and a Federacy coat, practically barefoot in her leather shoes, and had absolutely no defences against the cold.

“Achoo!” The abrupt sound descended upon the silent snow, and regaining their senses were Lena, who was clinging to Shin, and Shin, who was being clung on.

“So-sorry.”

“It’s okay...rather, since it’s cold, why don’t we go back?”

“Yes...ah!”

The blushing Lena pulled her distance slightly from Shin, and was about to return, only to nearly fall over in the snow.

Shin was slightly taken off guard, and pulled Lena’s wrist, barely holding her up.

Lena again grabbed onto Shin, and the two of them maintained this awkward position, barely maintaining their balance.

Still in this position, Shin asked.

“You didn’t twist your foot, did you?”

“It is fine...erm, I can stand upright...ah!”

While that did not seem to be the case, Lena again nearly fell over, and Shin held her up once again.

After all, she was wearing high heeled leather shoes that were inappropriate for the snow, her body was frozen by the cold, her movements were sluggish, the accumulated fatigue after the assault had set in, along with the relief after the battle ended.

Lena’s knees were clearly wobbly—and she was unable to walk well, so Shin made up his mind.

“...Lena. I’ll listen to any complaints you may have afterwards.”

“Eh...ah!?”

Lena was suddenly picked up, and let out a shriek. The coat on her was lifted at the back and the knees.

In other words, she was in a princess carry.

Shin then walked quickly, much faster than Lena's usual pace, a distinct combatant's pace.

"If you are worried, hold onto me."

"Shin, erm..."

"I did say I'll hear your complaints afterwards...you'll bite your tongue if you talk now."

"..."

It was difficult for Shin to not make a sound while walking on the snow path, especially since he was carrying someone.

Thok thok thok, the heavy footsteps were so unfamiliar to the girl called Lena, and she could vaguely hear a heartbeat through the sturdy skeletal structure and physique, along with the thick combat fatigues.

This silence was a little despicable, Lena thought.

Surely her heartbeat too was fast because of Shin.

"...Not heavy?"

"Not really. You're a little heavier than a cat, though."

Well, that certainly was the case.

The bloodred eyes did not see Lena's puffed up cheeks.

...In any case, Lena did not notice the fact that Shin could not look at her directly in this state.

However, Lena looked forward to hide her own embarrassment. The only thing her silvery white eyes saw was Fido, who was waiting for them on the other side.

If only this could be a little longer, such was the little notion she had.

2018 Thanksgiving Festival

They were underground...supposedly, the Revich Observation Base, and most of the space was occupied by the multi-legged units and the spare parts. Thus, the soldiers were squeezed into the remaining space.

Thus, the few cafeterias in the base were used for entertainment, and there were many Processors and mechanics of the Strike Package gathered in the third cafeteria. It seemed the soldiers of the United Kingdom were already used to such environments, for one could occasionally see them bring along some distilled spirits or snacks while charging through.

So Lena quietly observed in the shadows, but one corner that caught her attention was Shin and Vika, seated opposite each other, facing a board of International Chess.

Gathered around them were Raiden, Theo, Kurena, Anju and Frederica, and on the other side were Dustin, Marcel, Shiden, Rito and others. They were either standing by the side or seated on the chairs around the board, watching the battle unfold.

Alrighty, Lena stood upright to peek at the board, and suddenly frowned.

In any case, why would the white camp on this battlefield of black and white checkerboard made of ancient wood move to such extent? The white side was being crushed, utterly overwhelmed.

Is this not too much? Lena had the urge to interrupt.

“Vika, erm, please show some mercy.”

“Queen, do you understand what you’re saying?”

“Lena, I’m winning for some reason.”

Vika frowned as he stared at the board, and continued to play with a gaudy look.

Eh, Lena looked at the board once again.

It was,

The situation at hand spoke for itself. The layout showed that Vika was white, and Shin was black. In any case, she did not expect Vika to be on the losing side.

Given his skill as a commander, Vika should be strong at chess. Not to say that the present players were weak, but he was royalty, and it should be their hobby to play chess, or at the very least, to a more skillful level than Shin, who grew up on the battlefield.

“Shin, your chess...”

“I know how to move the pieces and how to set the formation, and I do play occasionally in the Eighty-Sixth District to pass the time.”

It appeared Shin was not very strong either.

“I don’t know what is the starting position, but I do know how to move the pieces, more or less.”

“...Did the Prince start off with a Fool’s Mate?”

Raiden muttered. This Fool’s Mate would occur when a path for the Queen was opened, followed by a checkmate at the earliest instance.

Nevertheless, Lena had never seen anyone lose because of it.

“Why did it...”

“I guess it’s because I wasn’t interested. It’s ridiculous to assume International Chess is a hobby for royalty.”

“Then why did you still join in...?”

Hmmm. Vika pondered his next move as he answered listlessly,

“I saw Nouzen and Shuga playing...and thought it was very interesting.”

“...”

As she looked at Vika’s sidelong face.

Lena associated it with the sight of a young child for some reason.

It was similar how a child saw a group of unfamiliar kids having fun, and joined them after being coaxed into doing so..

Kurena probably thought the same as she tilted her little head and asked,

“Will you try out ‘Risk’ next, Prince? Quite a lot of people almost did so.”

“I don’t know the rules, but if the conditions allow.”

“Ah it’s fine, we aren’t very familiar either.”

“That’s too tough compared to chess. Just to mention this, Shin can’t really play either.”

“We got too many numbers. What next? Can we take turns?”

“Ahh, I’ll be next up. How about we play something else? Any suggestions?”

“Seems like there’s a game where we pull wooden blocks out and stack them up. How about that?”

“...Vika will lose on the next turn.”

“What did you say...!?”

Vika leaned over after saying so, and elated laughter erupted from everyone.

Acquainted or not, everyone was fooling around without a care in the world, like children.

A snickering Lena said,

“Please count me in too.”

Volume 6

Because You Are Here

Shin

It was Shin's first visit to his grandfather's house, so after he politely refused the offer to stay for the night, he returned to the residence of his guardian in name, Ernst.

He opened the door, and was welcomed by his returning comrades, Frederica, and Lena, who was invited over by Ernst. Nevertheless, even after returning to Ernst's residence, he did not feel like he had returned home.

For some reason, Lena's eyes were teary, and it might be due to the maid Teresa making Republican dishes.

To Shin, it was the country he was born in, one he was long estranged from. Despite that, it was still Lena's homeland...one she was nostalgic for.

To forget, to abandon...such were not words to be said easily. At this point, Shin understood this well.

The Republic was the oppressor, and the Eighty-Six Mobile Strike Package, being the oppressed, were still worried for their own fates...and unable to lament the destruction of their homeland.

He however never noticed that such thoughts was so distant from him.

Henceforth, he had to pay attention, and was worried for Lena. As Lena had said on the snowy battlefield, he never cared about that to begin with.

The large table in the living room was laid out with the card game Frederica loved to play, and Shin joined in while they were playing. Lena, usually checking the battlefield maps and battle reports, was staring intently at the cards while holding them in a fan. She was giving the face of a commonplace carefree girl, smiling brilliantly. Frederica's right arm had yet to heal from the prior battle as she continued to fawn towards Ernst, who was losing terribly and dejectedly lowering his head in an immature manner.

Teresa joined in after clearing the dishes, and the manner in which she bombarded Ernst with all her might was a terrifying sight to behold.

Soon after, it was late at night. Frederica started to feel a little sleepy, and playtime was over.

“Good night, Shin.”

“Yeah. Good night.”

Shin led Lena to the guest room Teresa had prepared, and after greeting each other, he returned to his room. The bed was much larger compared to the cramped bed of the barracks in the Eighty-Sixth District, and he buried his head into the bed he was still unused to.

Suddenly, he realized something.

Ernst’s residence had many more rooms than the number of residents present, and the extra rooms were used as guest rooms. Actually, the rooms assigned to them were guest rooms, and Shin was closest to the other empty rooms because it was the quietest.

In other words.

A mere wall separated Shin’s personal room from Lena’s.

Once he realized that, he had a sense of vague relief in his heart.

...Next to him.

She would not suddenly vanish again now that she was next to him. She would not be taken away mercilessly, unreasonably.

He could not abandon her.

The fact left him exceptionally relieved. Once he let down his guard, an irresistible, mandatory sense of drowsiness struck him.

His consciousness was fading into oblivion, and ringing in his mind was the silver bell-like voice from beyond the Para-RAID.

—I will not leave you behind. I will definitely be waiting for you.

As she had said so.

He too will continue to wait for her.

The conversation two years ago, one he presumed would be their last, echoed in his mind again.

—Do not leave me alone.

If it’s me now,

I would have given a different answer.

Having such thoughts, Shin fell into the dark slumber, feeling satisfied.

Because You Are Here

Lena

They had just finished their mission, and Lena, welcoming the first break for the Mobile Strike Package, was invited to the residence of the Federacy president, Ernst Zimmermann, the legal guardian of Shin and the others.

The residence was located in a corner of the Federacy's capital, Sankt Jeder, and was filled with much elegance. The ruler of the greatest superpower on this continent lived in such a simple house. Welcoming her in were Theo, Kurena, Anju, Frederica and Raiden who had just returned, and Ernst.

Shin, who should have returned along with Frederica and Raiden, seemed to be at his grandfather's house. Frederica was pouting away for some reason, and a wryly smiling Raiden explained that as Frederica had gotten injured during the Dragon Fang Mountain operation, she got a rather long lecture from the maid Teresa.

Shin later notified them, saying that he would be having dinner at his grandfather's place. In his absence, everyone had dinner, and played cards and chit-chatted in the living room. The dishes Teresa made were all Republic styled, and Lena became teary eyed before she knew it. Soon after, Shin returned, and Frederica, still wounded in her right arm, welcomed him and fawned around. Ernst, who was thrashed thoroughly in the card game, was completely depressed, lacking in the vigor an adult should have.

Soon after, it was late at night. Frederica started to feel a little sleepy, and playtime was over.

The guest room specially prepared for Lena's arrival had a bed full of feminine, gentle colors and fabrics. Already overwhelmed with the urge to sleep, Lena recalled the events that transpired for the day...it was a happy, blissful day. She was fine with it happening forever. Everyone was smiling, even Shin, even though he looked so aloof, even though...

Then, she noticed something.

Next to this guest room she was assigned to.

Shin, who led her to her guest room, entered the room next door, about to sleep. The others too returned to their rooms, so in other words, that room was the one Shin was assigned to in this residence.

In other words,

The room Lena was in was a wall away from Shin's.

The moment she noticed this, Lena's face was flushed red.

Everyone else fell asleep, and there was silence. Perhaps it was for this reason that she could sense the movements and breaths beyond the wall, along with her own body temperature that was a little higher than usual.

It was just Lena overthinking it, actually. While the room was a little too cramped for a president's residence, it was no mediocre structure which one could easily eavesdrop through the walls, let alone the movements and breath of Shin, who had the habit of not making any sounds.

But.

—Speaking of which, I guess this is the first time spending the night together up close...

She covered her searing face, muttering away, unable to say it out.

They lived together in the same base for months, but as Colonel and Captain. Their rooms were far from each other, and their daily schedules were unexpectedly different. During mealtimes and free time for personal conversations, there were eyes surrounding them.

But this day was different. For the first time, she saw Shin in plainclothes...his relaxed face.

She had never seen him in his private life, either on the battlefield or in the base, looking so relaxed, albeit lazy. He was neither the headless Reaper on the Eastern front, nor the leader of the Mobile Strike Package—one might even say that was the real Shin.

That new look of his was refreshing...but so surreal.

He broke free from his position and responsibilities, entering his own personal space...and approaching hers. For some reason, her heart raced.

In the middle of the night, that voice got strangely louder, or so it seemed.

—Did Shin hear that...!?

The more she thought about this, the more restless her heart was. Lena covered the blanket of floral fragrance over her head.

Not To Be Seen

They returned from the United Kingdom of Roa Gracia to the Federal Republic of Giad. The convoy ferrying the Strike Package back home once again drove past the darkness of the tunnel beneath Dragon Corpse base.

The screams echoed, the bellows howled. While moving along with the others, Shin listened in on the noises subconsciously as he suddenly recollected the past. How he, in his childhood, was escorted to the concentration camp, how the soldiers were being violent to them on the trip, along with the words and actions of his brother and parents.

But as the memories were too vague, he could only recollect a fragment of those memories.

He looked around, and found many lying about, resting. There were fewer passengers about compared to before.

Nevertheless, the survival rates were much higher than being in the Eighty-Sixth District. Countries, army, such things did not exist in the battlefield of absolute death. It was surreal to them, for this was the first time almost everyone made it back alive.

One day, they might think it was natural for everyone to return safe and sound.

They had to return alive. Surely, everybody wished to return alive. Most of the Eighty-Six, not all, would have such a notion

Such a day would surely occur.

A breeze blew by, and silvery thread-like hair grazed by the corner of his eyes.

“—Shin?”

“Lena...what’s the matter?”

He looked up, and found Lena, who should be in the first-class carriage meant for officers. While this second-class carriage was not cramped in the slightest, it was filled with crates for combat purposes. The outstanding beauty raised her lips.

“I just, want a breather...mind if I sit here?”

“Eh, sure.”

Saying that, Lena hurriedly sat opposite him.

Shin was a little incredulous, seeing her like this. Given the difference in standards, the officers' carriage she was in should be a lot more spacious.

Lena seemed relieved, and let out a sigh looking as though she was really there to relax. She then stretched herself out like a kitten.

Finally, she showed a hearty smile.

"Good work there, Shin."

Shin would have typically dismissed it as nothing, and shake his head. This time however, he did not.

"Yeah. It's a little tiring this time."

He shrugged at her, and she narrowed her eyes happily.

After all, he was told to rely on her, and not to bear everything by himself.

He did not forget those words. Clearly they had reached him.

"Once we return, there will be a long vacation, and you can have a good rest...though we cannot visit the sea, no?"

The Federacy had no seas.

The closest coast was a military port to the North, currently unapproachable as it was within Legion dominion.

Despite that,

"Hm, but Lena, if there's a place you want to visit, I'll go with you. You aren't familiar with the Federacy streets after all."

"Really? Then please lead the way!"

Her smile was blooming like a flower.

Suddenly, the dazzling sunlight shone upon it.

The train passed through the tunnel beneath the base, and entered Federacy lands. Shown beyond the windows was the scenery of anxiety brought forth by the early summer.

Having been used to the silvery grey and white of the snow and the battlefield, their eyes were glittering. Captured within their sights were the deep blue skies and the blue cornflower fields.

They gasped in unison.

And in doing so, Lena said.

“...So pretty.”

“Yeah...it’s really pretty.”

Beneath the azure skies, the train raced down the tracks like a breeze.

Yes, they were on a high speed railway. Time seemed to pass by in an instant while they chatted, and they were close to the Federacy’s Kreutzbeck Terminal.

They ended their conversation with much reluctance. As tactical commander and battalion leader respectively, they had to do their duties while allowing thousands of Processors to disembark.

The train silently arrived at the terminal platform.

Both of them stood up in unison.

While they did not know when, it seemed someone took a photo of them while they were alighting.

“...The Publicity Department asked if they can use these for promotion, but,”

Grethe slipped two photos across the coffee table. Lena froze once she saw that, and Shin too was silent.

Naturally, the parties in the photos were the ones questioned, Shin and Lena. Lena was wearing a formal cap, dressed in the blue Republic uniform. Shin was in the standard steel-colored Federacy uniform, and given the background of Kreutzbeck Terminal, one could imagine which direction the photo was taken from. It was unknown when the photo was taken, but Lena was giving a somewhat bashful look, and in contrast, while Shin looked extremely quiet, he was giving a sharp look.

Shin and Lena were soldiers, and the enemy were not humans. At this point however, even a reporter could not simply aim a camera at soldiers without obtaining permission to interview. The Strike Package in particular had lots of classified operations, the objective to combat and suppress the Legion, so there was no way an interview would be granted. The train station was in fact closed, and all citizens, including the press, were unable to enter.

Nevertheless, it would be another case altogether if it was promotional work by the war department itself.

The Strike Package in particular was a promotional force proclaiming the justice of the Federacy, granting aid to other countries.

“Colonel Wenzel. This...erm, the aim of taking this photo with Shin...Captain Nouzen is...”

“By publicizing the Strike Package’s accomplishments, we can raise the morale and proclaim the Federacy’s justice. Saving the United Kingdom and destroying the Legion base is something great to be boasted of. By promoting the Strike Package without revealing classified information, it does seem like an intent to recruit volunteers. Let the people hear that young soldiers are fighting hard on the frontlines.”

“...”

Grethe nevertheless shrugged.

“Due for the circumstances of the Eighty-Six, while they are soldiers devoted to the cause of their countries, there is a view that no personal information, including photographs, should be revealed, Captain Nouzen. The decision lies with you two. This is not your fault, Colonel Milizé, but more because of the Republic.”

“Hmmm...”

Lena nodded halfheartedly, and pondered.

Shin stared blankly at the photo before him, without saying a word.

If promoting their actions could raise the morale of the soldiers, perhaps that should be done, but that would be still be embarrassing...so Lena thought.

Shin never cared about what the military thought, but even he too felt it would be too much of a hassle.

And more importantly.

He had a distinctive serenity, his unique bloodred eyes were chilling as he stared sharply like an ancient, famed blade. So Lena observed.

*So cool...*she thought.

The silvery white hair scattered like light. She looked bashful, smiling like a flower blooming for the first time. So Shin observed.

So pretty. He thought.

...However.

What was going on?

Shin. Lena. Though it was a mere photo, they did not wish for anyone else to see them in this, not everyone, at least.

They did not want to be seen by others.

Despite that, it would be pushing it trying to give an excuse beyond their beyond feelings, and they could not say it out loud. So both of them remained silent.

They were perturbed by the strong feelings borne out of their selfishness.

And upon realizing the internal conflicting feelings of the two young fellows, Grethe smiled wryly.

“...I see. Then, I shall refuse...how about a commemorative photo instead?”

““Yes!””

They were not hiding it.

They immediately answered in sync.

And then, they realized what they said. Lena’s face turned beetroot as she froze.

Next to her, Shin was averting his eyes awkwardly.

Grethe smiled wryly.

Goodness me, these two are too easy to read.

“I shall print it out in the best quality then.”

Toranoana Bonus

He was headed to the battlefield again the next day, but Vika, who has spent almost all his time fighting the Legion since seven years ago, was neither prepared nor emotional.

He opened the moonlit balcony window and left his room in the castle that was luxurious yet empty, nary any personal belongings.

On a night when the temperature would not rise, the Eintagsfliege was forced to lift its heavy silvery clouds. It was then that one could see the night sky above, akin to a lapel of the Queen of the Night, with snowflakes adorning the silver fox fur.

No matter how much the temperature fell, it truly was a worthy sight to behold at this moment.

Looking up at the starry night of early summer that seemed unbefitting of the frosty atmosphere, Vika recalled.

Lerchenlied.

That girl was once his milk sibling, and in the past, after all the trivial quarrels and disharmony that hurt them, she would forget to cry and the time if he found ‘that’ and told her, and would be mesmerized. She was such a young.

She had the name of a spring bird, but she was someone who liked the winter.

The harsh winter that could freeze the soul in the United Kingdom.

Even in the midst of such a harsh season, she was a girl who could find something worth loving...for she loved the world so.

...Even though they might see different things at the same place.

If she had been alive, once she realized her despair, she probably would return here to look again.

But her reply would never be known.

Vika heard footsteps over the thin snow, and looked backwards.

Looking down into the garden, among the very faint shadows formed by the stars, was a petite Emerald woman of forty years old or so, dressed as a palace maid.

It was a familiar face.

He could not remember well, but it happened during his infancy.

“Martina.”

She was the woman who once served as his milk mother.

She was also the mother of Lerche—Lerchenlied.

“Master Viktor, you will be heading to the frontlines personally. Please take care of your body, the goddess of ice and snow shall surely bless you.”

As a retainer in the palace, Martina was thoroughly raised to behave so, and Vika shrugged as he saw how she showed proper etiquette like a robot, given the angle and timing.

“Yeah. It’s the second time after all. We can’t lose that badly and escape again.”

“No...please come back safely this time. That is all that matters to me.”

She was not exhibiting the etiquette required in the palace this time, and instead, was on the verge of grovelling onto the ground.

It was a tear-choked voice.

It was the voice of the woman who welcomed him back from the battlefield in place of his mother.

When her daughter was still alive...after the mourning.

“Your Highness...is that child—Lerchenlied, still assisting you?”

“...Yes.”

He dared really did not dare to mention that she was so dutiful to lose everything below her neck.

She was the intimate retainer of Vika’s mother, Princess Mariana.

When Princess Mariana died and left Vika behind, Martina was carrying Lerche who was still breastfeeding.

This was the only reason why she ransomed his life along with her only daughter.

And the end result was that her only daughter was transformed into a walking corpse that resembled her appearance.

Although Vika felt it was justifiable for her to hate him, Martina had never shown such a side ever since she lost Lerchenlied seven years ago.

Even though he would be bringing her daughter's corpse to the battlefield in front of her again.

"I'm sorry. I can't give you back your daughter yet."

"No."

Martina looked at him, closed her mouth, and shook her head.

"No. A child shall one day leave its nest. It's only a matter of time until she flies to a world her parents does not know of."

She did not expect him to return his daughter or anything.

Not at all.

"The child had left my hand a little earlier, but she had laded upon your hand, Your Highness. It is a pity though...she never had the body to be bestowed with such honor after all."

Vika was a Amethystus, a royal. And Lerche...her daughter Lerchenlied was an Emeraud, a serf.

She could not hope to become a concubine, let alone a beloved wife.

The Idinarohks were the only remaining lineage who possessed the ability of the Amethystus. They could not let the ability be lost, no matter the reason. The pure blood could not be tainted with other colors.

Not to mention, it was a matter of the Prince's personal love.

"...Sorry"

"No. That is what she would have wanted, right?...I can only send her off."

At the very least, she hoped the bird that flew away would be happy.

Melonbooks Bonus

“...Captain Nouzen.”

After a long silence, Chief of Staff Willem Ehrenfried spoke up. It was a rare act of Shin, who disliked having his heart detected, and everyone knew this well.

Willem’s following words left everyone flabbergasted.

“Your learning skills are a little lack, I suppose? Given what was in the mission recorder of the Federacy Feldreß—the Reginleif, I suppose you returned all your knowledge to your teacher again, did you not?”

Chief of Staff Willem and the Generals in attendance had their eyes focused on a certain spot, and Shin remained on a temporary folding chair, frozen like an ice sculpture.

A General pressed the play button displayed on the holographic window, acting like a grandfather who wanted to see the result of a grandson’s prank.

The ice sculpture on the folding chair seemed to cringe, but Chief of Staff Willem ignored it for the moment.

“Captain Nouzen, it is true that you are eighteen, and what you did is understandable. Understanding is another matter altogether, so can you be a little more careful in combat? Do you have any idea what the atmosphere in the room was like when this record was shown?”

After all, those present were all generals—soldiers who had risen to the highest positions in the army.

After ten years of war, the average age of these generals were a lot younger, but they were at the point where they could have children. Or rather, the only one without wife or children was the Brigadier General Willem.

They were of similar ages, and had reached the age where they could define their priorities, responsibilities and egos. They could not be as reckless as they were in their youth, and it was the age when they could quietly recall the black history of their youth with a part of their rampant memories.

So when they heard those words of youth

Ahh.

What way to express so?

Youth is a wonderful thing after all...

Or sorts. All the Generals had their eyes widened, for it was so surreal.

Grethe, who too had listened to the recording, found it to be really youthful. She could not play a prank during the mission playback while reporting, and was prone on the table, unable to control herself.

And the Generals were not too different, for there was a devastation clustered in the meeting room.

[illegible]

“Calm down! You’re going to be reminded of your past rejected confessions!”

“Amy...I want to meet Amy...I want your apple pie right now...”

“Remember to call. Don’t cry and snivel now. Everyone wants to go home.”

“That little girl...if my daughter is taken away from me one day like this...I’ll...simply...!”

“...Does it really matter in the face of the 30mm anti-human machine gun?”

“...Captain has suffered a great deal with this. Seriously, be careful.”

“Repeating this twice as this is very important.”

“I’ll say this first, Willem, I did remind you to exercise caution when you were of Captain’s age. You can’t always cling onto Grethe—”

“Speaking of which, senior, I do remember the contents of your letter to your wife when you first started dating.”

“!?! H-How did you know?”

“Your writing is remarkable, so I thought I should see what was inside it, as reference of course. I forgot though...I should have made a duplicate.”

“What do you mean by that! Ah seriously...!”

“Brigadier General Ehrenfried, and Major General Altner, please resolve this on another occasion.”

“Now I’m mad. Altner, you can’t go about doing that. If you’re writing to express your love to the woman you admire, you need to express yourself in your own words, no matter how clumsy it is. That’s how an Imperial nobleman should be.”

“Then again Ehrenfried, you’re writing love letters...I’m surprised you can actually do that.”

By the way, there was quite a quarrel at a corner the table, to the point of boiling over.

And aside from that, the others were laughing to the point of being sprawled over the table, probably remembering their spouses at their hometown or evoking their homesickness; a certainly someone seemed to have flashbacks to the black history, and was completely devastated.

The oldest Major General looked as though he was going to witness his grandson’s road to love, and happily took out sweets; while the Lieutenant General, who was the Commander-in-Chief of the Western Front Army, was trying to hold back, to the point where his face was twitching.

All dignity befitting a General was gone without a trace.

If the minutes of this meeting were to be leaked out, there might be military turmoil.

That was why they never prepared any to begin with.

And Shin, the only outsider who witnessed the tragic situation before him, remained as unmoved as an ice statue.

One had to wonder if it was out of sympathy, but the adjutant who always followed the Chief of Staff went diagonally behind Shin’s chair, crouched down, and whispered into Shin’s ear.

“Captain, I’ll whisper to you later how to delete the data files.”

“I heard you, Second Lieutenant. You cannot be teaching others to do bad things so overtly. Believe it or not, I shall change the deletion procedures...speaking of which.”

Hmph, Chief of Staff Willem grunted.

“Our protagonist, the Captain, has not been listening...are you still not saying your true thoughts?”

A Certain Day of Second Lieutenant Perschmann and the Strike Package

Morning comes early in the army.

It was the top floor of the Rüstkammer Base Headquarters, and one could see the dim lights of dawn shining through the long, ornate windows lining the corridors, home of the Eighty-Sixth Mobile Strike Package. At this hour, when most of the civilians in the city would still be in bed, Second Lieutenant Isabella Perschmann was dressed in the steel-colored uniform of the Giadian Federal Army. She, deputy to the Mobile Strike Package's tactical commander, knocked on the door of her superior's office. Had has pale red hair tied up in a tight bun and green eyes. She was tall and slender for a woman, and wore silver-rimmed glasses.

Her superior officer, Colonel Vladilena Milizé, was the tactical commander of the Mobile Strike Package assigned to this base. She was the female elite in charge of the Eighty-Sixth Mobile Strike Package, the elite unit comprising of 8,000 state-of-the-art multi-legged Feldreß, the Reginleif, and their Processors, leading the offensives against the Legion. She was the cornerstone of the Mobile Strike Package, known as the "Bloodstained Queen" for her decisive and outstanding command.

I can't let her behave in a way that would undermine her dignity, such as letting her subordinates see her face when she wakes up from sleep. Waking up her superior was not within her job scope as deputy, but this was the reason she would drop by every day.

It was because the Processors, who were mostly in their late teens, loved to cause mischief, and not because of her mysterious sense of duty and possessiveness that drove her to protect the defenceless appearance of the beautiful young girl commander's unguarded appearance. Absolutely not.

Second Lieutenant Perschmann knocked sharply, but there was no answer, and she tilted her head. It was already past her wake-up time. Normally, Lena would be awake by now.

"Colonel?"

She put her hand on the knob, and it just opened. The door was unlocked.

Did she go to sleep without locking? If so, that's too defenceless of her. She needs to be more aware of her appearance...Perschmann was exasperated beyond words, and opened the door.

Lena was nowhere in sight in the operations commander's office beyond the door, and she looked around to make sure that was the case before heading to her bedroom that was connected. Even though it was a military base, it was also the private room of an adolescent girl. After knocking loudly enough to wake her up if she was asleep, Perschmann opened the door .

As it turned out, Lena was awake.

However, she had her head tucked under the bed for some mysterious reason, and only her slender buttocks, wrapped in the skirt of her navy blue military uniform, pointed at the door in a strange position.

Perschmann was speechless.

"...What's going on, Colonel Milizé?"

"Second Lieutenant Perschmann....! O-ouch!"

A short scream came from under the bed. It seemed that she had raised her head when she responded.

Silence occurred for a while due to the pain, and the Commander crawled out from under the bed.

She had long, lustrous silvery-white hair that were like satin, and large eyes of the same color. She was a beautiful, eye-catchingly graceful girl with translucent white skin.

Normally, she had a gentle smile on her face, and would switch to a sharp and serious look during a mission, but at this point, she was on the verge of tears.

"Second Lieutenant Perschmann, TP is... TP is missing!"

TP was the name of the black cat raised by Lena. Its official name was Thermopylae.

It's not uncommon in the military to have cats and dogs in the barracks, but the Rüstkammer Base was the home of the Armored Forces. Aside from the Feldreß, there was lots of heavy equipment and ammunition, and other heavy machinery such as cranes for moving such heavy loads, and the area was surrounded by forest, so it was somewhat dangerous to let them run free. Therefore, by principle, TP was not allowed to leave the barracks, and had to return to Lena's room at night.

“I’m sure we slept together last night, but before I knew it, he was gone....”

What should I do...? The Bloodstained Queen wandered around with a helpless look in her eyes.

Due to the aforementioned, the military base was a dangerous place for a cat to roam. After all, the Mobile Strike Package was a large unit comparable to a brigade. Even in the several mess halls, there were many large pots that could boil up a whole person, not just a cat.

Looking down, Perschmann nodded.

“Understood. I’ll go and look for TP. Please wait here, Colonel Milizé.”

Snap, the slightly moist silvery-white eyes blinked,

“But...Second Lieutenant, you also have work to do.”

“Your job is more important, Colonel. I’ll ask someone else to take over for me. Please do not wander around the base looking for TP by yourself, Colonel.”

“But.”

“Please leave it to me.”

“...Yes.”

Perschman spoke firmly, and the Colonel shrivelled like a schoolgirl being scolded by her teacher.

Goodness me. Perschmann let out a long sigh. It was fine that Lena realized her mistake, but it would be troublesome if she did not recognize her position. She was a Colonel, the tactical commander. Even though she loved the cute cat, she has to leave the trivial matter of searching for it to her subordinate.

The determination to not let a bunch of mischievous teenagers see Lena’s teary face stimulated her desire to protect and conquer, etc.

TP was Lena’s pet cat by registration, but unfortunately, Lena was not the one closest to TP.

So, the first person Perschmann went to visit was two levels down, on the floor where the Processors’ rooms were located.

Captain Shinei Nouzen. Operations Commander of the Mobile Strike Package, Squadron Commander of the 1st Armored Division, and also captain of the Headquarters affiliated Squadron, the Spearhead Squadron. In short, he was the one who stood above all Processors of the Mobile Strike Package.

Befitting of his title, his Feldreß piloting skills and combat capabilities were top notch not only in the Mobile Strike Package, but also the entire Federacy Western Army, and could boast the number of Legion kills to boot. He was the same age as Lena, and though he just had recently turned eighteen years old, he had five years of military experience before he joined the Federacy Army, where he acquired the moniker “Headless Reaper of the Eastern Front”. He was a monster of the Mobile Strike Package, who had participated in and survived several deathmatches that extended over a hundred kilometers in distance.

How does that berserker look? So she had wondered before she met him.

“...TP? Well, no, he’s not here.”

In reality, he was just like this, a quiet and tranquil boy, which is a bit of a surprise considering his moniker and previous reputation.

It seemed that he had just taken a shower before breakfast and after finishing his daily work load. He came out with a large towel draped over his tank top, wiping his dripping jet-black hair, and he also had Pyrope eyes that were colored as blood of the aristocracy of the old empire.

The Processor in the next room appeared to have worked hard too, and one could hear the sound of water from the shared bathroom between the two adjoining rooms.

“I see...Is there any chance that you’d know where it is, Captain?”

“As expected, a cat is....I mean, it’s not like I can tell where humans are, either.”

He responded nonchalantly to Perschmann’s joke, without smiling at all. It was unnecessary for Shin, a Captain, to use honorifics with Lena’s Second Lieutenant, but in his case, it is probably a sign of his desire to keep a certain distance from others, rather than respect for an older woman. His bloodred eyes were serene and tranquil in a way that belies his age...but there were moments when he would show a horrifying emptiness, a cold callousness as befitting of his nickname, the Repear.

The majority of the Mobile Strike Package’s Processors, including Shin, were Eighty-Six. Declared as humanoid pigs by their now-destroyed homeland, they were young soldiers who knew nothing but to fight, forced to live and die on deadly battlefields as weapons rather than people, and to die while not being deemed KIA.

They could not possibly be normal. Perschmann would always sense unbearable cold emptiness lingering around them whenever they talked. They could converse, and looked no different from others, but the emptiness could be felt all the more given the dissonance in values.

However, he seemed to have lost a lot of his composure lately.

He also had a surprisingly soft expression while talking to Lena, his immediate superior, which Perschmann was very uncomfortable with. As an officer, she believed that he should not change his attitude depending on who he was talking to, and it was not because she was possessive of Lena.

She glanced at the small, almost aisle-width room behind Shin.

Aside from a small bookshelf and a few books crammed into it, the room was empty and inorganic, with very few personal items. On a closer look though, one could see that the books on the bookshelf and the desk were a complete mess. As if to blend in with the clutter, there were proposals scattered on the desk.

They weren't official military documents, of course, since the Federacy Army mainly uses electronic documents. Written on notes that were used as bookmarks was his neat handwriting.

"Captain. You should be clearing 'that' up...what would you do if it was Colonel Milizé who came and saw them, and not me?"

"...Ah. Sorry."

Shin followed her gaze and looked at the proposals, but Perschmann could see that he was just brushing her off, and had no intention of following up.

Shin appeared to be similar to Perschmann's little brothers at home who were in their rebellious phases. They would find it a bother to be nagged at, and would give a perfunctory response, but didn't matter how many times they were told. They wouldn't improve.

She looked at him indifferently, and Shin seemed to know what she was thinking, for the edges of his mouth lifted slightly.

"Second Lieutenant, was your nickname when you were still in school Class Rep or something like that?"

"Too bad. It's Miss Minchin. Not that I wanted it though."

While Shin bade her farewell with a wry smile, Perschmann turned to leave, seething.

Maybe TP couldn't stand the hunger and went to the cafeteria to beg for food before Lena woke up, but that didn't seem to be the case.

Perschmann looked around, but found no cat, and in the corner of the first mess hall, the largest on the base, she put one hand on her waist and exhaled. She even asked the first lieutenant who was the head cook in the kitchen, but the latter didn't see TP either. The army mess hall wouldn't allow a cat or anything enter the kitchen, a place where hygiene was a top priority.

"...Second Lieutenant Perschmann? It's unusual for you to come to breakfast at this time. It's still too early for that though."

She turned around to see First Lieutenant Raiden Shuga. He was a tall, fearless man with short, iron-colored hair. The second-in-command of the Spearhead squadron, and an Eighty-Six, he was a soldier who turned eighteen this year.

"First Lieutenant Shuga. ...No, I'm actually looking for a cat."

"Cat? ...Ah, TP. Well, he's been wandering everywhere ever since we adopted him."

The decade-long Legion resulted in the shortage of soldiers and officers; such young soldiers like him were forced to take up the frontlines. The Federacy Army would serve them extra meals since they were still growing. In short, they would be served more food than an adult soldier. As a result, Raiden naturally devoured a breakfast that was a bit too much for Perschmann, a woman aged twenty five.

He nudged a paper cup of coffee with one hand towards her.

"You look restless, sit down and have a drink. I haven't sipped it yet."

"....Thanks."

She pulled out the empty chair in front of him and sat down.

She disliked black coffee, even if it was a substitute. While she continued to dump sugar into the coffee, Raiden gave a wry smile.

"Well...I guess women really like sweet things, huh?"

"That's prejudiced, First Lieutenant. I'm sure there are men who like sweets, too."

"Oh, you mean like Rito and the Prince? ...I guess it's not a waste of time for Frederica to make that."

"What do you mean?"

“Frederica said she’s going to bake cookies tomorrow. I’m supposed to help her with that after breakfast.”

“Huh?”

Frederica was the mascot of the Mobile Strike Package...a human sacrifice of girl assigned as a hostage to keep the fighters on the front lines.

In any case, Perschmann couldn’t help but ask back.

What did Raiden just say?

“What?”

Because.

Before her was a tall, fearless boy soldier, with short, iron-colored hair and a body that was becoming that of an adult’s.

“Cookies?”

“Yeah.”

Astonished, Perschmann asked again.

“Cookies?”

Hmph. Raiden snorted and turned away.

“That’s prejudiced, Second Lieutenant.”

“Hmmm. I wouldn’t let TP into the office, as I’m sure you know....”

Second Lieutenant Anju Emma tilted her head as her sky-blue eyes gazed at some holographic documents that were in full screen. She has long, silvery hair with a bluish moon that flows easily.

She and Perschmann were in the office that was shared by the Processors and rowdy every day. As soldiers on the front lines, they had to finish their paperwork before and after their missions. Filling the office were the sounds of many keyboards being typed at, hushed discussions, and the electronic sound of messages flying around. The loudest of all remained the idle chatter however.

After all, they were all lively boys and girls in their mid to late teens. There was no way that they could gather in one place and be quiet, and behaved as rowdily as the classrooms of her school days Perschmann felt as though she had witnessed five younger siblings at her old home, the eldest of them four years younger than her.

They were in the backlines, and while Perschmann did not appear in the frontlines, she was in a war zone, and she still missed her family.

As one of the platoon leaders of the Spearhead Squadron, Anju was a bit busy with her own paperwork and the reports of her subordinates. She kept looking at the electronic documents on the holoscreens while talking to Perschmann.

With the tips of her neatly polished fingernails, she pressed the enter key.

“And then...”

“Whoa!?”

One of the electronic documents disappeared from her holoscreen, and appeared at a platoon member seated a short distance away. His little shriek reached Perschmann.

“Yu-kun, don’t just write randomly because you don’t have time. Revise it properly and send it again.”

“Ehhh...seriously...?”

Anju smiled sweetly like a large white flower at the platoon member whose shoulders slumped dejectedly.

“We need to finish this by tomorrow, and we have to join in the preparations, so let’s get it finished as soon as possible, okay?”

“I mean, since we’re going to start with preparations, I don’t need to revise it further, right...”

Anju’s smile deepened.

There was an invisible intimidation lingering in the air, resulting in the platoon members and everyone else including Perschmann involuntarily backed away.

It’s scary.

“Did you not say so yesterday that you will finish it today? I see that you are still playing around, Yu-kun.”

“...Y-yes. I’m sorry!”

“Eh, I thought Lena didn’t let him out of her room at night. He won’t leave the barracks in the day either.”

Second Lieutenant Kurena Kukumila said, dressed in her steel-colored combat training uniform devoid of camouflage, and a flashy bright red flight jacket.

Slung over her shoulder was a hunting rifle instead of an assault rifle. There were several other Eighty-Six around her dressed in a similarly flashy manner. It seemed they were going hunting in the surrounding forest for the purpose of... Mountain Marching Training. The flashy clothes were probably to prevent them from getting into danger, since they wouldn't be easily recognized if the camouflage worked too well, and this was to prevent misfire.

There was consideration to build Rüstkammer Base next to a large city to ensure that the Eighty-Six could return to society, but a large area of land was required for Feldreiß exercises, so it was surrounded by a deep, inaccessible forest.

The base was built on the site of the former citadel. People living in the city across the river were also restricted from entering this forest, so the whole area is a paradise for deer, boar and other beasts.

“Yes. But there is always a chance that you might find him in the forest.”

She might have been surprised that Perschmann was putting in so much effort to look for a mere cat, but she nodded more seriously than the latter expected.

“Yup, got it. I'll definitely catch him if I find him.”

Perschmann looked over at Kurena, bemused by her sincerity, but the latter's golden eyes weren't looking at her.

She was staring at someone who appeared to be suffering somewhere.

“Daiya was the one who found him. That's why we entrusted the little one to Lena. I'm not going to abandon him.”

Perschmann didn't know that name...since there's no mention of this name elsewhere in this base, perhaps it was of one who no longer existed on this world.

When Perschmann realized this, she was momentarily speechless.

Kurena...and the Eighty-Six surely probably lost far more of their fellow Eighty-Six to the deadly battlefield they were trapped in.

“I'll leave it to you. I'll look for him myself, too.”

“Yeah. ...Thanks for that.”

“.....Second Lieutenant Rikka. You mean to tell me that this is a field building exercise...?”

“I got permission, so why not? It doesn't matter.”

An exercise would require permission from his superior officer, Shin, for the later was the overall-in-charge, so it was only natural that he would pass it.

Nevertheless, she didn't know what kind of absurd logic the two of them used to insist that this was a training exercise.

Behind Second Lieutenant Theoto Rikka, who responded, there was the sound of a light hammering, and a few boys fastened a circular board onto another board that was made into a stand.

Theo himself was preparing paint beside them. Painting was his hobby, and he drew his friends' Personal Marks. His uniform, and even his pants were covered in paint as he worked. He had a babyface coupled with blond hair and green eyes, unbecoming of his rugged personality.

"Is that darts for entertainment?"

"Uh, no, it's bingo."

Perschmann pondered for a moment.

"It's obviously a dartboard, right?"

"Yeah, so we write numbers on the disk, and then we throw darts at them in order to make bingo..."

"..."

This was the unknown bit. It felt as though they came up with the rules on the fly.

And given the mood, they would surely change the rules of the game midway through.

"By the way, where's the bingo cards? Are they handmade too?"

"Ah."

It seemed he had forgotten about it. Perschmann nodded.

"I'll have someone buy it for you in the next town, immediately."

"I'm sorry.I completely forgot."

Theo scratched his cheek with his hand that was holding a brush dipped in bright yellow paint. The paint did not touch his hair or face, but it caused new stains on the shoulder of his uniform.

"By the way, it's about TP, right?"

"Eh?"

"I'm sorry, but I haven't seen him today. Cats don't like loud noises, and I don't think they'd come to such a noisy place."

“...Well, I guess you’re right.”

“Ah... I’ll keep an eye out for you. If you find him, just broadcast to us or something. Since you’re going to look for him elsewhere, it’d be troublesome if you go around telling people you found him.”

Theo shrugged.

“I told you it was different, Crone. You’re the only one who’s off by a semitone, so do something about it.”

The entertainment room at the Rüstkammer Base was overflowing with data media such as anime, movies, and comics that were popular back home.

The Eighty-Six hardly had any form of good entertainment during the formative years, so the high-ranking officials of the Western Army and the legal guardians of the young soldiers would regularly send them some. There were paperback books on the bookshelf, steadily increasing their territory, and they were entertainment novels among Shin’s personal belongings that he has finished reading...was a public place just one for him to dump his belongings?

For some reason, there was a piano placed in a corner of the entertainment room, where Lieutenant Colonel Viktor Idinarohk, the prince of the United Kingdom and a visiting officer of the Mobile Strike Package, was seated at today.

There are about twenty Eighty-Six surrounding him and the piano, practicing a song. His Royal Highness, the sinister Prince of Roa Gracia, also known as The Serpent of Shackles and Decay, was somewhat fed up and complaining to one of them.

Perschmann spoke up while walking to him.

“Your Royal Highness. So you play the piano.”

“I see you’ve finally come to understand that it’s fine to treat me so, Perschmann. I have to admit, you were a pain in the ass in the beginning.”

The Prince said nonchalantly to a mere Second Lieutenant.

As he said, she had become accustomed to him, and she gave him a blank stare. His Highness’s purple eyes and beautiful face were twisted in a sneer.

“Well, I’m royalty, after all. Don’t you think it’s expected that one should be able to play a musical instrument as a matter of taste?”

“I’ve been told that His Highness is not very good at chess, which is supposedly a favorite hobby.”

“...Don’t you think it’s a Prince’s hobbies are trivial, Perschmann?”

“There’s a contradiction in what you say.”

In short, it seemed that he chose to play few tunes in the spur of the moment.

Deciding that the conversation was over, the surrounding boys and girls of the Eighty-Six opened their mouths.

“Your Highness, erm, about what you just said earlier. You said it sounded different, but I can’t tell.”

“Me neither. I don’t think it would bother anyone.”

“To be frank, Your Highness is just being petulant.”

“What?Lerche, how about you?”

The question was answered by a girl in the corner of the entertainment room, his knight and royal guard who had nicely tied blond hair and green eyes.

She looked somewhat apologetic.

“You are correct about the different pitches, Your Highness...but if you ask if I mind, that is a different matter...”

Vika immediately clicked his tongue.

“Then it’s fine...let’s continue.”

His whiny voice caused the surrounding Eighty-Six to burst into laughter...on one side was Vika, Prince of the Northern United Kingdom of Roa Gracia, and on the other, the Eighty-Six who were not deemed as humans by their homeland. Perschmann was worried if both parties could coexist, but it seemed her fears were for naught. The term ‘Your Highness’ appeared to be a nickname or something, and they had established themselves as mere comrades-in-arms and friends of the same age.

“By the way, Perschmann, why are you here? You’re not going to practice singing now, are you?”

“Eh. Actually, I’m looking for the cat that belongs to Colonel Milizé.”

Trembling, Lerche took a step back.

“Oh no! Your Highness. What have you done?”

“...Lerche. As far as I’m concerned, I wouldn’t bother with a live cat.”

Vika looks back at his servant with half-lidded eyes.

Lerche, who looks like a human girl to Perschmann's eyes, was actually not a human being. She was a mechanical doll (Sirin) created by Vika using the brains of the war dead as the central processing system.

It appeared that even for him, killing a living being is still forbidden.

In front of Perschmann, who was about to heave a sigh of relief, Vika added.

"Not today."

"..."

Henchforth, Perschmann swore to herself that she would not leave TP alone with Vika.

"It'll be ready in ten minutes."

"Oh?"

Like a witch in a candy house, Frederica stared into the oven with a strange expression on her face and remained still.

Her long, lustrous black hair was tied up in twin tails, just for today. Her face, though young, was as exquisite and adorable as a doll's.

When Perschmann came to the kitchen, she said twelve minutes to go, and exactly one minute ago, she said eleven minutes to go. She looked like a pigeon on a cuckoo clock, or rather, like a one-minute clock, since a cuckoo clock wouldn't tell the time every minute. She looked busy.

Raiden spoke as he washed bowls and molds in the sink a short distance away.

"Frederica, the oven won't explode even if you don't look hard at it."

"Do thou not know? Penrose once turned chocolate purple when she was just melting and hardening it."

"Is such a miracle possible? That usually doesn't happen as you think it does."

"In hindsight, such a failure is a wonderful memory too."

Perschmann nodded, remembering her own mistakes at home such as the over-mixed sponge cake that didn't rise and became cream. It's a funny story at this moment, but back then, it was pretty depressing.

"Oh, I see..."

Snorting, Frederica was wearing an apron with a cute bear applique, and her twintails were tied with a brand new ribbon. The former was bought for her by Anju, and the latter by Kurena. In addition, it was Second Lieutenant Reki Michihi

who did her hair today. For some reason, Frederica's favorite large stuffed bear, was placed on a chair in the corner of the cooking room, as if to watch over her. It was said Shin bought this for her before.

The Eighty-Six pampered this girl, the mascot of the Mobile Strike Package, to varying degrees. It was as if they wanted her to experience what they couldn't or wouldn't do for themselves in the past.

Big, bloodred eyes, like jewels, looked up at Perschmann.

"Thou are looking for TP, no?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, I haven't seen him. I'd like to find him, but I don't think I can."

Again, she looked at the oven like a soldier in the trenches on the front lines, tensely watching the enemy army that was about to invade.

"I have to fulfill the responsibility of baking cookies. I can't bake enough for everyone, but some will have the Squadron Logo on them. I hope they shall be pleased."

Perschmann's eyes relaxed slightly.

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Mmm. ...Ah!"

Frederica suddenly shrieked, and Perschmann leaned slightly as she checked the inside of the oven.

Nothing strange appeared to be going on.

"Raiden, Raiden, I just heard a strange noise! Isn't that a sign of something strange?"

Raiden said, unfazed. He was clearly familiar with the situation.

"Frederica, it wasn't the oven, it was just singing birds outside."

With a pair of scissors, she cut the colored paper into long, thin strips and glued them together to make a long, continuous loop.

"I know you don't want Lena to walk all over the base today. That said, thank you for your time, Second Lieutenant. Unfortunately, he hasn't come this way either."

The technical officer, Major Henrietta Penrose, also known as Annette, said as she silently made the decoration from a chain of colored papers. She had short

silvery-white hair and eyes, and she was an Alba like Lena, and wore the same navy blue uniform of the Republic of San Magnolia. She was a researcher girl who was dispatched to the Federacy with Lena.

The paper chain ornaments that look like something a child would make look out of place in the inorganic office block of the research team and the spotless white coat she wore. The color combination seemed somewhat weird to Perschmann....no, very bizarre even.

It was best to maintain a balance of the colors, but bluntly put, it was a boring color scheme. Second Lieutenant Dustin Jaeger, another Processor dispatched from the Republic, continued on from he. He too had silver hair and eyes, and the same navy blue military uniform. A tall, well-proportioned figure, he had an honest face.

“Let me help you, Second Lieutenant Perschmann. I’m sure it’s hard for one woman to navigate this large base.”

“Nothing to worry about. Anyway...”

Perschmann quietly turned to Annette, trying to look as casual as possible.

“Second Lieutenant, please continue to help the Major.”

“Yes, you’re not planning to abandon me, are you, Second Lieutenant Jaeger? I know I look like I’m cool with it, but I’m actually crying right now. I feel so sad.”

Truly.

The entire research team, including Annette, was in charge of the decorations, but she was the only one who hadn’t finished her quota yet. The other researchers had finished their work and were putting thin paper chains and roses that look good with their white coats and steel-colored uniforms into the cardboard boxes they brought in. The chief developer of the Reginleif, who seemed to have already gotten carried away with excitement, was tossing the paper butterflies into the air.

Perschmann thought for a moment that the developer could have helped out.

She was not a bad person, though she’s a bit of a dunce, so she’d probably chip in later after realizing so.

“Aah—.....right. Sorry about that. I won’t abandon you. Let’s do our best, Major.”

“Don’t tell me you are surprisingly clumsy at this, Major?”

“What do you mean, surprising? I have always been clumsy by nature. Half the time I make sweets, they end up as a big mistake.”

She said in a sulky tone.

In that way, she was still an eighteen-year-old girl.

“...Since I skipped a few levels at school, I didn’t have any friends my own age except for Lena. I’ve never really made anything like this at school or at home.”

“...”

Annette unrolled the rustling paper chain that was too long for her hands. One part was not fastened properly, and the chain came off in the middle. She glued it back together.

“So I’m having a lot of fun making this. I think I’m going to cry a little. Tomorrow, too...but I’m sure everyone is getting ready right now.”

“—Is it over, kids!? That’s the extent of your fucking guts after surviving the Eighty-Sixth District! One more set, ready!”

It was a common sight to see a mature instructor shouting at young soldiers during physical training, but it was bizarre to see in the army to see the training of the Mobile Strike Package, in which Master Sergeant Brent Bernholdt, a non-commissioned officer, was scolding the Processors who were officers.

Bizarre as it might be, neither the Eighty-Six, who have been treated as weapons for a long time, nor Bernholdt, who was treated as a mercenary, minded about the loose military discipline.

Bernholdt and his subordinates, the Old Combat Territorial Army, were a fighting group that has been defending the borders and fighting foreign wars since the days when the Federacy was an empire, and they were a frightening existence to Perschmann. These war-crazed Beastmen live on the frontiers of the Empire. Bernholdt’s gray-silver hair and slightly pale golden eyes resembled an old wolf.

Still, finding TP was the top priority right now. Just because she was scared, it didn’t mean she couldn’t ask.

...Furthermore.

“Look, you say it’s entertainment, but no belly dance. Do you want to get killed from all sides?”

“But isn’t the rifle drill too simple?”

“It’s not that simple. We’re born with the rifle, and it’s a chance for us to show this tradition to a bunch of Eighty-Six brats who are only a generation old.”

“Say that after you beat Captain Nouzen in combat. We’re warriors, why should we be proud of our traditions instead of our fighting skills?”

“So, let’s not compromise on our bellies.”

“I told you, no belly dancing. There’s a couple of young ladies in the house. Get it, you knuckleheads.”

For some reason, these were adults discussing such unimportant things with extremely serious faces.

Even so, she would tend to talk to them at a little more distance than she would talk to others.

“Master Sergeant Bernholdt.”

“Oh, hey there, Second Lieutenant.”

The veteran Master Sergeant glanced at her, and the other former war veterans paused their conversation and backed away slightly...at a distance, they continued to debate the pros and cons of doing a belly dance.

“Is something the matter? You don’t particularly need this kind of training, do you?”

“No, actually.”

If she told him so, he might burst out laughing.

So she thought, and decided to ask.

“I’m looking for a cat. Colonel Milizé has a black one.”

“Ah~, so it’s the little guy who’s so attached to Captain Nouzen...no, we haven’t seen him. Right guys?”

Everyone nods their heads in agreement, and Bernholdt turned around.

“Well, he is an animal, so I’m sure he can manage on his own. But I guess the Colonel is very worried.”

The veteran Master Sergeant, who had spent more time in combat than Perschmann had lived, nodded so. Contrary to her expectations, he didn’t laugh, and was serious.

“Roger that, Second Lieutenant. I don’t think he’ll come this far, but I’ll keep an eye out for him.”

The next place she checked at was the one place where cats were definitely prohibited.

In other words, the Armored Weapons Hangar.

In the first hangar, the largest in the base, the Federacy's most advanced Feldreß, the mainstay of the Eighty-Sixth Mobile Strike Package, were lined up with legs folded in a row.

The XM2 Reginleif, multi-legged armored weapons for three-dimensional high-mobility combat.

The agile quadrupedal legs resembled knotted feet. The main cannon and a pair of fighting arms were mounted on its back. Anti-armor pile drivers were attached to each of the four legs. The pure white armor was the color of a polished skeleton, as cool and fierce as the war maiden it derived its name from.

With no mission to fulfill, the pure white fighting machines hid their ferocity within their armor and slumbered quietly in the dim darkness of the hangar.

...No, that would be incorrect. One corner of the hangar was too loud to be described that way.

"Yeah, I'm not going in here, no matter how much I want to. I haven't actually seen it."

Said Second Lieutenant Rito Oriya, who was overseeing the noisy commotion. He was fifteen years old, young for a Processor, and his face was still full of innocence. Agate-colored hair and large eyes.

Second Lieutenant Reki Michihi, who was also in charge, continued. With her brownish-black hair and ivory-colored skin, she was an Orienta girl with roots in the Eastern part of the continent, a rarity in the multi-ethnic Federacy.

"It's the cat that Captain Nouzen and the others raised in the first ward, isn't it? I think even a cat knows that it's dangerous to get too close to the Juggernaut."

The Eighty-Six, including Michihi, called the Reginleif "Juggernaut". It was the name of the Feldreß that they used to pilot while trapped on the battlefield by their homeland. It was the name of a Pagan God who ran over and killed believers who gathered for salvation.

"Yes, but I can't find him anywhere ...I thought maybe he was here."

"Maybe he got lost? I mean, cats move around all the time."

"..."

That was why she had been looking around asking for where TP was. Everyone else had said they would take note, but she had yet to hear from them.

As Perschmann stood there, expressionless but troubled, she was suddenly interrupted by Second Lieutenant Yuuto Crow, who had remained silent until now. He was a boy with pale blond hair and eyes as crimson as fire, but he was as silent and emotionless as one would expect a Reginleif to be if he were to speak.

“By the way, Second Lieutenant Perschmann, now that you’re here, what does this look like?”

Yuuto pointed to the back of the hangar that Perschmann had been avoiding to look at.

In a large corner of the hangar, where simple tests were carried out, more than ten Reginleifs were rhythmically swaying from side to side, with heavy machine guns on their fighting arms and fuselages weighing more than ten tons, dancing strangely while clanking away.

She did not want to look at the dance, for she might lose it if she looked there.

Perschmann responded as she thought about it.

“Is it an imitation of a spider’s or a scorpion’s courtship dance?”

The pair of fighting arms resembled scissors, and the 88mm cannon on the back resembled swishing tail, and the four-legged Reginleif had a spider or scorpion-like appearance, so that naturally came to mind.

Once she mentioned so, Rito and Michihi slumped their shoulders in disappointment.

Yuuto’s face was expressionless as usual, but one could somehow sense his disappointment.

“Courtship dance, huh...?”

“It doesn’t look like cheerleading...”

“.....”

It really didn’t.

Also, if it was cheerleading, why was a waltz being played?

And then, Yuuto gave a hand signal to the Processors in the Reginleif, causing the group to stop. The maintenance crew rushed over and attached light sticks to the ends of the fighting arms, and the Reginleifs swung the light sticks violently from side to side and diagonally upward to the opening theme of “Magical Girl something”, which Frederica had recently become addicted.

“...Some witchcraft ritual?”

““““””””

The three of them huddled together and began to whisper “What should we do?” “How should we change it from now on?” “I’m sorry, but I’m not familiar with this are”...why did it sound so troubled.

...In the first place. It is impossible to make a Reginleif, a non-humanoid, perform a human dance.

Sighing, Perschmann said.

“...Well, this is interesting, isn’t it?”

The young soldiers looked back at her. Perschmann nodded her head without smiling.

“I think you’ll get a laugh out of it.”

Once she entered the processor’s locker room adjacent to the hangar, the door to the shower room at the back of the room flung open.

“Hey, Second Lieutenant Perschmann! I hear you’re looking for TP? Just so you know, he’s not here!”

“At least cover your breasts, Second Lieutenant Iida!”

Perschmann blushed and shouted. She would like to praise her own reflexes for slamming the hangar immediately after walking in from the hangar.

“Heh heh!”

Despite being told so, Second Lieutenant Shiden Iida shut the frosted glass door without covering her breasts, and contrary to her manner of speech, she was a woman. An Eighty-Six girl, she has curly red hair and heterochromia eyes of dark indigo and silvery white.

She had body proportions far beyond girls her age, a larger bust than the slender Perschmann, and was not ashamed in the slightest to flaunt her breasts. Perschmann thus had a headache, and pressed her temples.

Living in a war zone and concentration camps since childhood had caused lots of negative effects on the Eighty-Six, and this was one example.. For them who had lived for so long in an environment no separation of bathrooms between men and women, and where they lived without privacy, they lacked any sense of shame.

In fact, even here in the Rüstkammer Base, the Eighty-Six didn’t seem to think it’s strange that men and women were mixed up on the same floor, let alone in the same building. In addition, the facilities manager desperately took away decision

making from the teenagers, to avoid situations where people of different genders shared the same bathroom.

“Ah, sorry , sorry. I didn’t think you’d be that surprised.”

This time, she came out with a bath towel crudely wrapped around her.

“I wasn’t surprised, I was exasperated. And you look...”

She was about to tell Shiden not to be dressed up like that, Perschmann blinked.

She had assumed Shiden was taking a shower to wash off the sweat after the day’s training, but the latter was covered in paint everywhere. Her hair and her sun-browned face was covered in reds, blues, oranges, greens, almost like the seven colors of the rainbow.

“What’s with the paint all over you?”

“Well, you just saw it. The Juggernaut dance, the performance for tomorrow’s event. If we’re going to do it, I thought we’d make it flashy, so I asked the maintenance crew about it and I painted one of them for the show.”

“I see...”

Certainly, one would want to head to the showers immediately after that...despite this, if she was looking for something.

“Excuse me. But would that come off?”

“Well, somehow. I haven’t bathed completely.”

Suddenly, Shiden burst out laughing.

The sun had already set and it was almost dusk.

Perschmann began to get impatient, wondering why she couldn’t find the cat. The Colonel would not be able to truly enjoy herself if she could not find her beloved cat, even though everyone had prepared so well.

They were in a military base, surrounded by highly classified, elite troops. She approached the imposing front gate that was guarded by Sentinels to prevent outsiders from entering, when she heard a voice from behind the gate.

“Hey, Second Lieutenant. Have you found TP?”

She turned back, and found it was Kurena and the others. They had finished their hunt and returned before dark. They were riding on the back of a huge, bulky, square-shaped, four-legged mechanical machine that hadn’t been here before.

He's called a Scavenger, an autonomous transport machine that accompanied the Reginleif during battle to replenish ammunition and energy packs. Because of its role, they would be switched off and stored in a hangar when not on duty. There was only one Scavenger currently active, affiliated to Spearhead Squadron, called Fido.

Kurena jumped off the back of Fido, showed her ID to the Sentinel, went through the gate and ran up to Perschmann. The latter shook her head, "No," and her shoulders slumped.

"I see. I wonder where TP has gone. Will he come back when he's hungry. ...Oh, everything's going well over here. Tomorrow, you can count on me."

Her golden eyes turned to see one of her companions lift up the head of a magnificent deer lying on its side. Somehow, each of them managed to carry the prey of their hunt by themselves or with several others, and walked towards Kurena.

Fido was the last to pass through the gate. Its huge body, approaching with crunching footsteps, suddenly stopped in front of Perschmann.

It was a support machine for transportation, a weapon albeit unarmed, and on the back of it was a collection of flowering branches that had apparently been cut down here and there in the forest. Apparently, he (?) had been preparing for tomorrow in his own way. Perschmann had no idea how he did so with his rugged crane arm, but there were even early summer flowers that he apparently picked.

His round optical sensor appeared to be showing concern as he stared at her intently, and it was strangely adorable. Perschmann felt her shoulders relax a little. An automated machine he was, he wasn't advanced enough to handle combat, even though he was just a mechanical device that should have no consciousness or emotions.

"Fido, can you talk?"

"Pi."

He even responded with an electronic tone. So cute. Perschmann asked him, trying to be funny. How would he know? There was no way they could communicate after all.

"Do you happen to know where TP is? It's a black cat with white feet that belongs to Colonel Milizé and often hangs out with Captain Nouzen. I've been looking for him, but I can't find him."

“Pi...”

Fido’s entire body tilted as if he were tilting his head. Perhaps it was thinking.
After a moment.

“Pi?”

His finger, or rather, the crane arm, pointed at it, as if to say, “Could it be?”

Looking up at the top floor of the quarters...where the Commander’s office and private quarters were, Perschmann gasped.

On the top floor, there was Lena’s room and.

Her superior officer. The Brigade Commander’s office and private quarters are also on the top floor.

It was a blind spot. Yes, she should have looked there first.

“TP? Yeah, he’s been in my room since this morning.”

Perschmann fought to keep herself from falling to her knees as Colonel Grethe Wenzel, commander of the Mobile Strike Package Brigade, nodded. She felt a sense of exhaustion, and then a touch of relief.

The stray black cat that she had been looking for all day, for which Lena had spent the same amount of time worrying, and for which the Eighty-Six and everyone else had been concerned to some degree, was oblivious to everything that transpired in the day, appearing to be very interested in the catnip being shaken in front of him.

Grethe spoke after glaring at the Chief of Staff of the Western Army, who was lounging comfortably on a leather sofa in the reception set, teasing TP with a cheap plastic catnip that didn’t look right in his hand, thinking of the latter as an eyesore. She had extremely short blonde hair and her trademark neatly applied red lipstick.

“I think he got a little spooked because everyone has been scrambling to get ready since yesterday. I guess he figured he could hide in my room, since it’s at the far end of the compound.”

“I see.So, how on earth did he get out of Colonel Milizé’s room?”

“It seems that Colonel Milizé was up very late last night.”

The next morning, which was today, Lena opened the door lazily, probably being sleep deprived, and TP probably escaped without her noticing.

“If I had known you were looking for him, Second Lieutenant, I would have approached you. I didn’t look outside today because I was trying to finish up for tomorrow.”

I apologize, Grethe said and then looked again at the Chief of Staff at the reception set.

“Therefore, Willem. I’m quite busy with tomorrow’s preparations, so now that you’ve done your job, go home.”

Grethe was a Colonel, and the Chief of Staff was a Brigadier General. It was an impertinence that could not be tolerated in the ranks, but Chief of Staff Willem shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. The Chief of Staff had jet-black hair and eyes from the pure bloods of the Onyx, the same bloodline as the great aristocracy that remained in the Federacy. He was a peer of Grethe’s when they were students, and even now they often bantered.

“How cruel, Grethe. I thought I’d come by and check on you. But it seems that you and the Eighty-Six are...up to something tomorrow, huh?”

Grethe smiled.

“Yes, we are. That’s why I’m busy. You can join us tomorrow, if you want. But for today, go home.”

“I am sorry, Second Lieutenant Perschmann, but thank you so much...!”

“No, it’s fine.”

Perschmann shook her head pensively at Lena, who kept her head down as she hugged TP tightly.

The black cat in Lena’s arms purred lazily, and rubbed his head against the hand of his master which he had abandoned for the day...it was an envious, heartwarming sight in times of warm.

“Anyway, Colonel. Please go to bed early today, as we have a lot of work to do tomorrow. Please don’t stay up late like you did yesterday.”

Lena blinked her silvery eyes in puzzlement.

“Tomorrow? Is there something I should know?”

“Yes, there is.”

She widened her eyes in shock.

“But there’s nothing on the schedule...”

“Yes indeed. So hurry and go to sleep.”

Go on.

Without realizing it, Perschmann smiled.

“Please have a good night.”

Perschmann was in her bed, after lights out, in a small, corridor-like room reserved for officers of the Mobile Strike Package. She stared into the darkness with her green eyes without her glasses and pondered.

Lena was known as the Bloodstained Queen, and was in charge of all the Processors in the Mobile Strike Package, including Shin. However, she was still only eighteen years old, and in a peaceful age, she would still be a mere child. The Eighty-Six, acting as her sword that stood proudly on the battlefield, were all still teenagers.

Before the war started, when Perschmann was just their age or a little younger, teenage officers like Lena and Shin had never existed.

Everything changed a decade ago.

The Legion. A vast army of automated machines that devoured up the entire continent in war, with the supreme order to annihilate any sphere of influence that opposed them.

Her father, a soldier, died in battle against them. Her mother was left with five younger children, the eldest of them being four years older than her, and she decided to earn money for the family.

It was not that there was no pension for the bereaved, but it was still difficult for the family of six if she didn't leave home. Furthermore, her younger siblings still had schooling.

The best place to get a job was in the army. It was not a rarity.

The Legion War was intense since the start. There were people who lost their breadwinners and enlisted for their families, many who were her friends in school. Many had family members who could not return, or lost their families...and some could not return.

Lena and the others surely did not have the choice that Perschmann had.

As time went on, they had no choice but to fight to survive in the tight war situation or in the deadly battlefield where they were abandoned and trapped by their own homeland.

At least for Lena and the Eighty-Six, the other young soldiers in the army, if it were possible for them to have a simple, joyous day.

And tomorrow, for example...

With this thought, Perschmann fell asleep.

Unknown to Lena, all the personnel of the Mobile Strike Package had planned and prepared a party to celebrate the end of their deployment to the United Kingdom.

It was a surprise for the Queen, who had fulfilled her great duty, albeit at a minimal cost.

There was no alcohol, as the majority of the Processors, the Eighty-Six, were still too young to be legally allowed to drink alcohol in the Federacy, but there was still food and sweets prepared by the base cooks, flowers, decorations, music, and a festive atmosphere. There was no cafeteria to accommodate everyone, so the party was held in the largest hangar on the base and the plaza in front of it.

In the middle of the party, people cheered at a game that had originally been a bingo tournament that had turned into a backwards dart throwing contest, and booed loudly at the prizes, which were T-shirts made by the Rüstkammer Base's Liquor Store (various types with the battalion commander's squadron logo and with the battalion commander's autograph on them). For entertainment, there was a singing performance by the volunteers of the Eighty-Six, a rifle drill by the old combat veterans, who were not quite as old as the real guard of honor, and a mysterious dance by a squadron of Reginleif painted in the seven colors of the rainbow.

The Chief of Staff, who really showed up, had brought some cream pies to throw as souvenirs, and a throwing contest began. While this was going on, a push-up contest started on the other side.

The boys, who seemed to have lots of energy and were still underdeveloped, really didn't know the limits of their own physical strength.

With a rare smile, Perschmann walked among the Eighty-Six who had fallen asleep all over the venue. One by one, they fell asleep, and then everyone else fell asleep, and before one knew it, the party was over.

Bernholdt, Grethe and the adults looked around with similar wry smiles, wondering how to wake up so many people, even though they should return to their rooms since it's almost lights out. Lerche, a non-human who didn't need to sleep,

lent her shoulder to her sleeping Lord, and was unable to move, but her green eyes shone in the dimness.

In another corner.

Perschmann's wry smile deepened as she spotted them.

It was a corner where the ruckus was relatively mild.

Lena and Shin were sitting on containers next to the hangar wall, and appeared seemed to have fallen asleep together, leaning against each other, sleeping quietly.

They were leaning against each other, as though they were cuddling. Occupying both of their knees, TP was lying on his back, oblivious to his wild instincts.

It's an ordinary, unremarkable...yet unbelievably peaceful scene.

Perschmann blinked away, and murmured.

"...At least."

Like yesterday, it was just a simple, ordinary day.

And like today, it was a fun, joyous time, a moment of reprise amidst the flames of war.

She hoped that such moments would occasionally come to them, and that they could enjoy so wholehearted. She hoped that they would still remain until then. Second Lieutenant Isabella Perschmann prayed alone in the darkness, with no one to hear her.

Bloodstained Queen, Repear and Little Piggies

The unique sweet aroma different from heated sugar belonged to that of dough kneaded with fresh cheese. Shaped with a mold, eyes and nose added, a fluffy, adorable—...

“...Pig.”

“I heard that such snacks are eaten during such festivals in the Federacy.”

Lena stared at the piggy snack with a conflicted look, and next to her, Shin showed a wry smile,

They were in the city next to the military base, at the central plaza with a bell tower placed there. They were in plainclothes on this holiday, standing before a stall amongst the many that had filled the entire plaza and street.

It was the tenth anniversary and celebration of the Federacy. The other regiments would open their bases to the public and invite the people to celebrate. The Strike Package was recently established however, and most members were not local-born Federacy citizens. The higher-ups had deemed that they had no involvement with the anniversary, and thus there was no regiment event to celebrate. All the members ended up coming over to the city to celebrate, just like them.

“Pigs have been a symbol of fertility since ancient times. I guess this is for good luck.”

“Yes yes, and you can try your luck out if you buy our little piggies!”

They were not wearing uniforms, so on first glance, one could not tell that they were superior and subordinate, but they did not resemble siblings in any case. The boss grinned as he looked at the duo, and guffawed as he quipped so.

Lena’s interest was piqued, and she tried to ask.

She was then reminded that the signboard of the stall not only included the name, but also had the following words written in a childish font,

“Let your heart race! Little piggie challenge!” or something like that.

“Want to try your luck?”

Yeah, the boss opened his arms like a courtier saluting a king or a noble. Inside a dust-proof glass case were piggy snacks of similar ilk on first glance, stacked to the brim.

“Draw your flavour.”

In other words, there were many flavors inside, and one had to eat to know which filling it was.

Lena found it very interesting, but she did not say so. Shin said,

“Two for us, please.”

“Alrighty.”

The boss quickly wrapped the little piggy snacks with paper, and gave one to each person.

“You two don’t look familiar here. Are you from the base nearby?”

“Yes.”

“I see. Thank you for your hard work till this point...this is for you. Do your best.”

The boss poured cranberry juice into plastic cups for them.

The duo thanked and left the stall.

The city folk might have been on the streets, for they were packed. Both of them went through the crowd, and in the blink of an eye, that little stall was nowhere to be seen. The city was in a joyous, celebratory atmosphere as the anniversary festival proceeded.

It was actually Lena’s first time walking while eating. She was worried that she would look undignified to Shin, who was walking beside her, and nibbled at the cute ear with her little mouth, ripping it off.

She chewed, and widened her eyes.

“—It is delicious.”

It was filled with pork meat, chopped mushrooms and onions. The sweetness of the onions and the fragrance of the mushrooms blended perfectly with the lard. She took a sip of the cranberry juice, and the sourness was just right that it cleared her mouth, leaving behind a fresh taste.

In contrast, Shin too took a bite of the piggy head, and frowned slightly.

“...It’s sweet.”

On first glance, she found that Shin’s snack was filled with honey-coated nuts.

The thick honey was sweeter than sugar, and might be a little too sweet for Shin, who disliked sweets. The cranberry juice should be sour, but he immediately downed it immediately after tilting his head back.

Lena could not help but giggle as she saw him look at the remaining snack with a conflicted look. This was a boy who could remain unfazed against the hordes of Legion on the battlefield.

In the face of this adorable little piggy that was the size of his palm, he looked so gaudy.

“Let us swap then.”

Eh? Before Shin could turn, Lena reached out and snatched it away, giving him her piggy. She took a mouthful of the piggy she snatched before he could say anything.

Lena’s unexpected action caused Shin to blink repeatedly.

While it was really of great help to him...

You sure you don’t mind? Shin swallowed these words back once he saw Lena goggle up the sweet filling piggy.

“It is really sweet.”

“...Yeah.”

The little piggy was not the only sweet thing.

Since he did not manage to say so, his words were unable to reach Lena.

Shin gobbled up the minced meat snack in twice mouthfuls, and Lena’s eyes dazzled.

“Shin, it looks like the parade is about to start! ...That is an elephant, is it...! Amazing...!”

“I guess...so. It’s probably your first time seeing a real elephant.”

Beyond the crowd was a large gray animal walking before a troupe of men and women in costumes, pulling flower petals from the basket on its back and scattering it everywhere it went.

“Let us get closer to have a look!”

“Sure...you’ll trip over if you go too fast, Lena.”

The ten-year war made it possible for Lena to see an elephant for perhaps the first time. She was being all excited like a child as she ran forward, and Shin gave chase while showing a soft smile he rarely showed in the Eighty-Sixth District.

Naturally, the two of them held hands.

The petals scattered everywhere fluttered under the blue sky, descending upon the celebrating crowd.

Volume 7

April 20th: Theo's Birthday

Gifting birthday presents appeared to be a boom amongst the Eighty-Six.

The Eighty-Six had largely forgotten about their birthdays, and also forgotten the significance of celebrating their own birthdays, so it was bemusing for them to be gifted presents from the Republic citizens Lena, Annette and Dustin, along with the Federacy citizens Grethe and Marcel. Those in the same squadrons, or previously of the same squadron, would receive presents like snacks, dolls and little ornaments.

Once the operation in the United Kingdom ended, they shifted to the school dormitories for vacation purposes, and all sense of tension was long gone.

In any case.

“Here, Theo. It is late, but happy birthday.”

“No erm...I get that it's the in-thing to do right now, but...”

Anju beamed away as she handed over the ‘present’, and Theo looked down at her.

“My birthday should be in April or so, but it's July now. You don't have to celebrate for the sake of it.”

They discovered their birthdays when they were deployed to the Republic, and the April batch, including Theo, could not celebrate in time.

Nevertheless, despite it being late, Lena gave him a color pencil set before they were deployed to the United Kingdom, and he was a little happy about that.

And his comrades who had seen that thought it would be fun to celebrate his birthday, even though it was late.

If they just intended to celebrate.

“You do not have to worry about that. Here, for you.”

“Y-you're kidding me! Aren't you guys just making fun of me, Anju, Shin, Raiden and everyone!?”

Theo hollered without thinking.

Anju was presenting a cute fox that fit the palm of his hand.

But well, he did not care. Theo had no interest in it, but he knew it was them shouting out to his Personal Mark.

The problem was that just fifteen minutes ago, Shin gave an apologetic look as he too gave a fox, a funny looking doll in fact, and just ten minutes before that, it was Kurena. Before her were Frederica, Raiden and Annette, every single one of them decided to give him a fox doll as a birthday present.

Given how it turned out, he had to think they were just pulling his leg.

“Ah, and these are from Shiden. Might be too many dolls for you.”

“...You’re selling baskets of foxes to me or something!? Hey Shiden! I can hear you laughing over there!”

And ten minutes later, Dustin, who seemed to be out of ideas, brought a tanuki doll from a certain country, intending for it to be paired with foxes, but Theo slapped his face without thinking.

“...Oww...this is Sagittarius. Succeeded in delaying the target...though it appears he’s getting really angry. Is that a success?”

“Snow Witch to Sagittarius....good work Dustin. Return now.”

Having successfully executed the diversion at the cost of his dignity, Dustin retreated, his footsteps heard over the Para-RAID as Anju replied so. All RAID devices were forbidden to be used within the school campus, but they had obtained special permit on this particular day, and consent would be granted for subsequent days.

“So Lena, please do the honors.”

“Yes, leave it to me!”

Lena hurriedly rushed over, her long silver hair covered with some colored powder, and she looked somewhat mottled.

And Annette, looking on, sighed,

“I did not think it would take that long...”

“I would not have made it in time if you have not come up with the delaying tactic—”

“...Maybe that’s a little...”

Next to a guffawing Shiden, Shin retorted with his eyes half opened. Lena and him had gone out to procure the materials for this delaying operation (they were out on the streets often, and everyone assumed they were out dating), and he too looked down at the fox, looking very worn out as a result.

Clapping the powder off his hands, Raiden said.

“Well, even though we were the ones who helped out, I guess I don’t like this after all.”

“Yeah.”

Kurena nodded, proud of their own efforts. She wiped her nose without noticing her fingertips were colored, chuckling while a pink line was drawn across her face.

They were in an empty classroom, no desks or chairs to be seen. The old dark green blackboard contained no traces of its original color, however.

Everyone aside from the few saboteurs had their hands covered in chalk. They ran out of chalk, were completely covered in it, and took more time than they had expected.

But even so,

“I guess sometimes we’ll just draw whatever we want.”

Five minutes later.

Theo remained wary as he was led to the classroom by Lena. Everyone here had contributed money to purchase a large trunk of art supplies he could carry along. He saw that everyone had drawn their Personal Marks on the blackboard, his in the middle, and he stood with his mouth agape.

May 6th: Kurena's Birthday

“Kurena...it is a little late, but...happy birthday.”

“T-thank you?”

Kurena hastily received the little box Lena handed over. A birthday. How many years has it been? She had already forgotten about that.

The Eighty-Six felt there was no need to remember their birthdays, let alone celebrate.

“Can I open it?”

“Of course. I hope you will like it.”

Kurena opened the little velvet box, and found a gold pendant inside. The gold chain would match Kurena's slightly tanned skin, and embedded at the base of the chain was an orange stone.

Wow, she was mesmerized, her breath taken away.

It resembled the thing she envied years ago...during the peaceful times she no longer had memories of, the thing her mother and older sister had.

It was dazzling, so adult-like.

“So pretty...”

She blurted out, and Lena smiled.

“Thank goodness.”

“Yes. Erm...I'm happy about this...h-hey!”

Kurena asked Lena, having thought of something. Since she received a gift, naturally, she should repay in kind.

“When's your birthday Lena? Anyway,”

Kurena herself had forgotten about this.

Her parents and sister died, so those who knew of her birthday should no longer exist.

Thus, she did not expect to celebrate her birthday.

“How did you...know my birthday?”

“—Shin.”

Shin, who was called, had a really thick book tucked under his armpit, one which he had lost before. Between the pages was a slip of paper used as a bookmark, a silver one, one that probably did not belong to him in the first place.

The bloodred eyes turned towards Kurena, showing her, and blinked; he eased a smile.

“What? Something good happened, Kurena?”

“Eh?”

“You look rather happy...you’re smiling.”

Shin said as he showed a serene smile, a smile Kurena was unfamiliar with.

It was a nice smile, so she thought. Two years ago, they should have been buried in the first battle area of the Eighty-Sixth District, and he faced his fate with grim eyes; nowadays, he seemed to be smiling more.

“Yeah...just a little.”

Kurena was a year younger than Shin, and for that reason, Shin had always, always treated her as a little sister.

She was glad to be treated as a little sister, rather than just one of the ordinary Processors in the same squadron, but this was not what she wanted.

She did not intend to say what was on her mind, because they were not compatible.

They could not stand at the same place, just as they were not of the same age.

But.

Kurena’s birthday was May 6th.

And Shin’s birthday too—was in May, 19th.

Shin, being about a year older, was yet to be eighteen. He remained seventeen as the eighteenth had not arrived.

So for the ten or so days, they were the same age.

Despite that, Kurena was glad for this little moment of ‘similarity’.

And at this moment, the person she would never ever catch up to was certainly—standing at the same place as her.

Shin saw Kurena show an inexplicably bittersweet smile, and appeared to have realized something.

“Speaking of which, it’s your birthday, right—sorry, I’ve been busy.”

“No, it’s fine. I know you’re busy now.”

Kurena and the 1st Armored Corps of the Strike Package were expected to head off to the next battlefield half a year later, the United Kingdom of Roa Gracia. As the overall leader of the 1st Armored Corps, Shin probably was busy with the preparations.

Shin frowned, looking a little perturbed.

“...But,”

Kurena had forgotten her own birthday, and was fine with that. However, she wanted to celebrate his birthday one day, now that she had known.

Kurena said with a smile. She wanted to reach out to him as a comrade of equals, a little sister who liked to fawn around.

“Anyway Shin, treat me to cake at the canteen. I want chocolate.”

“That’s fine...but is that enough for you?”

“You have some too.”

“I...”

Shin said that even while knowing that he could not handle sweets; as expected, he looked increasingly perturbed.

Kurena giggled as she looked up at him.

May 19th: Shin's Birthday

——*Let us all celebrate together.*

Yes, she did say that.

“...Well, he slipped off to accept another mission.”

“Ehh.....”

Annette took a sip of the replacement coffee as she said this. Lena knew of the mission's importance, but was dejected about his absence.

May 19. Shin's birthday.

He himself had forgotten about it, but Lena learned of the day through the remaining records of the Republic, and wanted to celebrate for him.

They were at the headquarters of the Eighty-Sixth Mobile Strike Package, Rüstkammer Base, in a corner of the officers' mess nobody else would visit in the day. Lena was like a white, fleeting flower pelted by rain, sprawled upon the handrest of the sofa alone.

Good thing her subordinates aren't seeing her like this, Annette thought as she picked up a Savoirdi served for tea.

The hazelnuts and precious cocoas, luxurious produces of the Federacy's South, were the real deals. They are really delicious.

“You're dispatched to the United Kingdom, right? That place is another important frontline.”

It would be May, including that day, and it was expected that the Eighty-Sixth Mobile Strike Package would be deployed for missions into various countries.

“We are soldiers...we should be prepared for this...”

“What you say is different from what you feel, Lena.”

If she were a kitten, her ears and tail were clearly dropping in disappointment.

“...Speaking of which, didn't you say you want to celebrate Shin's birthday? You haven't talked much to him recently.”

“That...”

Moreover...she did that foolish thing.

After their dispatch mission to the Republic, Lena heard from Annette about what was going on with Shin.

Well, it was to be expected then, but ever since, they had been shunning each other.

The excuses from them are pretty flimsy though, so Annette thought as she slipped another Savoirdi into her coffee.

If she had taken a photo of Lena's current gloomy look, that would probably be a nice present for Shin.

Such a prank should be fine, especially for Annette, a childhood friend of Shin, and someone the latter was comfortable with as a comrade.

"Well, it is not just Shin; the other Eighty-Six have forgotten about their birthdays, and will not celebrate them. We'll know if we just look into it, right? And even if we do know, we can just pretend not to."

Various administration means were done for the entire Strike Package to see if there was an appropriate day to celebrate their birthdays and years. The Eighty-Six did not really care about it, but there were plans to celebrate everyone's birthday (as there were thousands of them, every day would have been a celebration).

However, it was impossible for them to celebrate every day, so Grethe instead suggested that 'everyone born in the same month celebrate together on the same day'. Shin and Kurena were born in May, that seemed harsh.

Lena suddenly leaned forward.

"I cannot pretend not to! ...I failed to notice, and now that I know, I have to celebrate his birthday...I think..."

Thinking about this, Lena was dejected once again.

Well, that is really troublesome, so Annette suggested.

"Anyway, how about giving a present?"

"Eh?"

"I bought one before you quarrelled. One for Shin, one for Second Lieutenant Kremy and one for Second Lieutenant Rikka, even though it was a month later. Spent an entire day on the next street choosing them."

One could easily imagine how difficult and time-consuming it would be to choose a person's present. Any more persons involved, and it would get ugly if they ended up arguing about the fairness of the gifts instead.

“But...the Captain should be busy preparing for the dispatch...”

Once again, Lena started to dither.

This might get a little troublesome, so Annette thought as she took that thing out. *Ahh, seriously.*

If Lena is unable to hand the present over to him, then let her find an excuse to pass my present on instead.

“So, useless Miss Lena, on your best friend’s behalf...you listening?”

Ahh seriously, why am I being the good guy here?

“——Captain Nouzen. This is a lost item. It’s yours, right? This book is a little hard to understand.”

“? Ah, sorry.”

Typically, a corporal had no need to deliver a lost item over. The hard covered book was once left in the waiting room, but disappeared somehow.

Shin had read that book before, but it was a mean to break free from the Legion voices. Guess it’s probably a prank from the cat, or Frederica, so he thought initially.

“...Hm?”

Shin realized something, and opened the book with one hand. The thick pages naturally flipped to another side.

Stuck between the pages was not a note slip placed in place of a bookmark, but a metal bookmark, a silver plate with fine carvings.

He took it out, and a heavy, embossed card fell upon the page. There was faint fragrance, a familiar sweet violet.

The words were written in Heliotrope, in the elegant handwriting he was acquainted with over the past month and the half year two years ago. The card was specially designed with outlines of lycoris and a standing Juggernaut.

“We shall do the celebration next year...happy birthday.”

“...Isn’t it a little too early, Lena? There’s still half a month.”

But by then, they would be on the battlefield. *Guess there’s no helping it*, so Shin thought as he closed the book.

In July—if they would return, he wanted to celebrate the birthday of a certain person, currently scampering down the hallway.

May 19th: Shin's Birthday – Reverse

“——Captain Nouzen.”

He looked back, and saw a girl with silvery white hair, dressed in the deep blue Republic army uniform and a long sleeved coat. She was Major Henrietta Penrose, of the Eighty-Sixth Mobile Strike Package.

“What is it, Major Penrose?”

“Annette is fine. Dispense with the formalities.”

Annette, who was staring intently at him for quite a while, looked as though she had long forgotten about her actions.

Shin was holding onto the philosophy book he lost days ago. The bookmark gave a silvery glow from that angle, looking alluring.

“It’s your birthday, no? Sorry for all the trouble I’ve caused you before.”

With a stoic look, Shin received with one hand a case of cufflinks.

Those were accessories to fasten the shirt sleeves instead of buttons, but they were not usually worn on formal attires. Except for the battle dress uniform and army uniform, he hardly wore any service dress.

Naturally, Shin frowned.

“.....Why give me this?”

“Didn’t you hear my apology?”

“I don’t really use it.”

“No point returning it to me now. I don’t have any other gift prepared. Also, officers have to attend parties, and you need formal wear.”

Even if there is, I don’t want to go.

Such words seemingly appeared on his face. Annette quietly sighed reluctantly.

“I’m leaving. Make sure you wear it then...got it?”

She then wordlessly shoved it into him.

The cufflinks were made of little rubies and platinum, along with fine orange flower patterns.

For some reason, Shin appeared to be pouting as he slowly reached his thin fingers in.

“Make sure you wear it, especially when going out with Lena for such events.”

——Currently, in Annette’s room.

There was a choker that came with the cufflinks, to be given to Lena two months later

Of course, Shin did not know about this, yet.

May 19th: Shin's Birthday – Continued

“...Nn.”

Rei blinked his eyes when he saw the courier delivering a small package. It was from the capital of the Empire of Giad, Sankt Jeder.

“Marquis Nouzen.....from grandfather?”

Rei never met the grandfather, who resided in their homeland even after his parents had abandoned it. It seemed his father would send letters regularly, but the grandfather never once replied, except for that once, a message to celebrate Rei's birthday, along with a picture book.

Rei was glad to receive a gift, but the picture book was really in bad taste, and he curled his lips in disdain. The young little brother peeking from behind the pillar of the hall approached, looking interested in the item, but seemingly afraid of the messenger (stranger).

“Grandfather?”

“Ahh, you don't know huh, Shin? Dad's dad. He erm...lives in a foreign country, he can't meet us.”

Shin tilted his head in confusion upon hearing that.

He knew what a grandfather was. His childhood friend Rita would drop to play, and that grandfather was a wrinkled old man who had pure white hair, different from Rita's silver hair. Back at home, he never heard that term before, he thought a grandfather was like a 'grandmother' or 'maid' at his friend's place, that some households would have, and some households would not have.

“Do I have one?”

“We do. Mom's dad died, but Dad's dad is still alive...see,”

The package was directed to Shin, probably to celebrate his birthday. Rei thought it would be better to show it to his father, but he tore the wrapping, and took the content out.

As expected, it was a picture book. It was wrapped with a black silk ribbon—even at this point, Rei was disinterested in it—a picture book of a headless skeleton knight.

He gave this after all. Rei's lips curled again.

About ten years ago, he too received the same book. The plot was interesting, thinking back about it, but the protagonist was a headless skeleton knight. It was too scary for his infant soul, and he did not really read it.

Shin himself was a little timid, and it might be too hard on him...

But contrary to his thoughts, Shin's eyes were sparkling.

"Picture book!"

"Happy birthday to you, Shin."

There were two other letters inside, one in the form of a card on top. It was written in simple words for any child to understand.

The other was written to his father. Rei handed the card and the book to Shin; his hand was big enough to hold them in one hand, but Shin's little hand could not, and the latter basically embraced them.

With sparkling eyes, he scanned the skeleton knight on the cover—Rei looked a little terrified however—his face was a little numb as he asked.

".....You want to read it?"

"Yes!"

The Giadian Empire had changed its name to the Federal Republic of Giad, but the Nouzens remained extremely influential in the government and the military.

Any child of the family of servants starting off would surely be lost within the vast capital residence of the Nouzens. The Marquis Seiei Nouzen was inside a carpeted office the size of a citizen's apartment. The pure blooded Onyx directed his pitch black, eagle-like eyes at the servant on standby.

"Stewart."

"Yes, master."

A servant to a noble was a shadow-like existence, but it was a different matter when summoned by his master. Marquis Nouzen looked up towards the servant dressed in the old era suit and a monocle that had walked towards his desk.

"I remember you have a grandson who had just turned eighteen."

"He has been assigned to the cadet academy. However, he has no authority to meet you directly, master."

"He does sound impressive, but that is not what I want to ask. Yes..it is."

The old warrior who had once led half of the Empire's military was stumbling like an inexperienced, indecisive novice of a lieutenant.

"What would a child of that age like to receive for his birthday?"

The old servant smiled.

"It is for Master Shinei, I believe?"

He was referring to the child of Reisha, eldest son of Marquis Nouzen who had abandoned the Empire and left for the neighboring country, the boy who was Marquis Nouzen's grandson. The war against the Legion resulted in them losing contact, and their fates remained unknown for nine years. Two years ago, a certain incident resulted in the grandson being taken under custody upon the battlefield of the Federacy.

Ever since he was contacted by the current guardian, the temporary president of the Federacy, Marquis Nouzen had requested to meet countless times, but his requests were never fulfilled as Shin himself refused.

"I suppose...a gift for an eighteen-year-old boy is a little..."

The old servant nodded solemnly.

"A little pocket change will suffice."

Marquis Nouzen slammed his hands hard onto the heavy ebony desk.

And he suddenly lifted his face, yelling at the servant.

"How can a first heartfelt gift from a grandfather be so devoid of emotions!?"

"Cash should be fine."

"You're annoying me!"

Pfft, Marquis Nouzen lashed out at his childhood friend. The latter had a hand on his mouth, those adept taunting skills still as good as ever after half a century!

"But speaking of which, you do not know what Master Shinei likes, do you?"

"Well...you are correct."

"Even if your grandson stayed in the same residence, he would have spent more time with his classmates than his grandfather. Since you don't know what he wants, you may give him some pocket change for him to buy whatever he wants. You never saw Master Shinei, never knew what he likes, so you may be overestimating yourself to hazard a guess, pfft."

"Don't you say it!"

This time, he was met with a chortle.

As Marquis Nouzen cupped his head, the old servant hid his mischievous chuckle.

“...Master Shinei does not wish to meet you, which shows that he has yet to sort his feelings. You should understand what he is feeling, and celebrate for him first, no? In that case, if all you want is to celebrate his birthday, perhaps you can celebrate that he has survived till this point?”

“——Ahh, and another thing Captain. There was a package delivered to you during your deployment. Please claim it.”

“Baggage?”

They were at the main headquarters of the Strike Package, Rüstkammer Base. Shin frowned upon hearing the words of the allied sergeant.

They were deployed to the United Kingdom starting in spring, for about two months, and it was early summer as they returned. However, he had no memories of any luggage or requests addressed to him. The Eighty-Six lost their families due to the oppression of the Republic, and there was no one delivering letters or packages to them.

The sergeant pretended not to see Shin’s surprised face as he took something deep within the storage. The Federacy’s shopping system was intriguing to the to Eighty-Six who were stuck on the battlefield since they were children. They were dispatched from time to time, but it seemed a few had been shopping during the period. Logically, the storage would contain goods to be claimed, and the sergeant in charge would hope he would take them away.

“Over here...this is the receipt. Please check and sign.”

The allied sergeant held the special pen and the electronic paper onto the package large enough to be held within one hand.

The package was once unsealed by the military, and there was a stamp indicating that it was resealed. The receipt and the tag on the bag contained the sender’s name...

Upon seeing it, Shin blinked.

“Marquis Nouzen?”

His grandfather was a great noble of the Empire. Shin had refused the requests to meet till this point, and his grandfather probably understood his intent. However, his grandfather never sent any letters or packages or the like before...

“Supposedly you celebrated your birthday during deployment, Captain. Well, it should be a present. It’s a little late, but happy birthday.”

“Ahh...”

Perhaps it was so.

Speaking of birthdays, he remembered he made it back in time for Lena’s birthday as he returned to his room, and cut it open with the multi-tool knife.

Till this point,

He did not want to meet his grandfather. Not that he was fine with not meeting, but that he did not want to.

At this point however, he did not feel this way. He still did not want to meet, but not forever.

He had to meet his grandfather, to face his past.

He lost things in the past, and was thoroughly terrified at the thought, even though he wanted to reclaim it back.

There was a box with a brand mark showing itself, and it was wrapped with a black silk ribbon. He did not think it was distasteful in any sense, and for some reason, he felt a little nostalgic, so he opened the box.

“...A photo frame?”

There were a few photos and a book, probably a family-oriented item, like an album. The silver and glass photo slots in the pages were all empty, save for one card containing a familiar skeleton attached on the first page—

I am glad to be able to meet you again.

Happy Birthday.

“.....”

They never met, but for some reason, Shin slowly traced the image that left him a little nostalgic, and the beautiful handwriting that was hard to read.

There were no photos of his parents, his brother, and himself. He no longer remembered any of their faces.

But Marquis Nouzen might have some photos and letters from Shin's father. Once the photos were found, perhaps the emptiness of the photo frame, along with the memories, could be filled a little.

Come and fill it—come here and meet.

That might be the message.

Fu, Shin chuckled unwittingly.

It felt as though he was nudged in the back by an old man he never met.

“Fill it with what we get in the future, is that it? —Marquis Nouzen.”

He still could not refer to the man as his grandfather.

But he should hear from the latter the true intent of the photo frame, and the origin of the skeleton picture.

So Shin thought as he placed the empty photo frame on the desk.

July 12th: Lena's Birthday

"Lena. Happy birthday."

Saying that, Raiden suddenly took out a large canvas tote bag.

It had the sewing of a light pink spotted cat. While the design was cute, it seemed to be for something else. It was made with firmer fabric, and seemed to be something used by housewives buying groceries, not a gift.

"Thank you very much. Speaking of which, is it today..."

She forgot as she had been busy recently

"Yeah...so continue to work hard today."

...*Why?*

Of course, it seemed Raiden got her this shopping bag for this purpose.

"Ah, you're here, Lena. Here."

Theo called for her as she walked down the corridor. He handed her a scenery collection with a ribbon upon it.

"S-since I received a present last time, this is my thanks. Just this."

Kurena was blushing for some reason as she handed over a cute kitten print photo frame.

"It is a nice smell, so I will put it on your desk...just to make sure you will not lose it, I suppose?"

Anju gave an impish smile. She was delivering a heart-shaped basket containing a rose potpourri.

"In that case, what I shall give is this. This, to be accompanied with tea."

Frederica gave boxes of candied rosewood sweets that were lined together like jewels.

"Yes, Lena. This is from me. If only we have a party."

Annette gave little gemstones of red and silver, along with a thin choker made from orange flowers.

"Colonel, happy birthday. This does happen from time to time."

Grethe's gift was a wine red rouge with a bright brand logo.

“Ah, Colonel. It seems you’ve been bogged down by many things. Erm, this is from your subordinate.”

Dustin was looking bashful for some reason. He handed over a handkerchief set.

“Ahh Your Highness. A certain someone~~~~~ won’t be giving this thing, for sure, so put it on for the time being!”

And Shiden, snickering away for some reason, handed over a cloisonne ring.

“Colonel Milizé. I heard that today’s your birthday.”

“A token of our appreciation. The Federacy has few tea sets. It was difficult trying to find one.”

Major General Richard and Chief of Staff Willem arrived at the headquarters for some reason. Their gifts were a can of synthesized tea and a white porcelain tea set.

“*Pi!*”

Even Fido gave her a gift. It was a lira flower stalk plucked from the forest in the back, a rarity for this season.

Every few steps she took, someone would stop her, and she would greet. For every person conveying their well wishes to her, the presents in her hands increased in numbers.

Lena never expected that everyone would be celebrating her birthday. While embarrassed, she was really delighted. *Ah, there’s a birthday menu for you today, Colonel*, so the massive head chef said as he passed her by.

She returned to her office, carrying the filled tote in her clutches.

Huh?

She was wondering why her Aide, a second lieutenant, was standing at that peculiar position. The aide’s slender position so happened to be blocking a white marble low table.

The female bespectacled officer with red hair and some bangs continued flatly as she stood at that strange position,

“The *bouquet* is from me.”

“Th-thank you very much?”

So, why was she standing at such a mysterious position.

“This thing is a little delicate, and somewhat heavy for a female. I thought I should wait until you bring your items here.”

“...?”

The aide did not respond to Lena’s questioning look, took the lira flower from Fido, slipped it into the vase behind her, and hurried off.

The blocked low table finally entered Lena’s sight. There were lilies and various strange flowers inserted into the crystal vase, forming a faint flowery silhouette under the dim sunlight.

And right over there was an extra thing she never saw when she left the office in the morning.

There was a square plate of antique design, with a round disc ornamented with little gemstones, a round, oblique mirror and a cylinder reaching into the disc. The closest thing resembling it would be a microscope.

There was also a large screw on the desk, probably a music box. Lena twirled it as it creaked, not knowing what would happen. For some reason, a nostalgic melody rang from the music box, and the disc spun at the same rate. There was a mirror in the cylinder, so it probably was a kaleidoscope. The images displayed in the round mirror opened like a peacock, or a window of roses, the vibrant floral patterns everchanging before her.

So pretty it was, she was completely mesmerized before she knew it. It had nostalgia-inducing curves, the moving light and colors flickering around.

She lost count of time, and forgot to breathe. She did not know why the sender chose to give this. Beneath the paw of the stand was a note with the twin headed hawk emblem of the Federacy.

The handwriting was a little erratic——but Lena could recognize his neat words.

“Happy birthday, Lena.”

Fufu, so Lena gave a wry smile.

He, as the battalion commander, was hassled by various matters. He was cooped in the hangar with the research team and the mechanics, busy testing the Reginleif system updates. However,

“Seriously, can you not have waited for me a moment...Shin?”

Lena herself had once ran away, so this time, she would let this slide.

July 12th: Lena's Birthday – Continued

“—Milizé.”

Lena turned around to find Vika and Lerche, standing behind him as usual. Vika was wearing the summer uniform of the United Kingdom, with the Strike Package insignia of Lieutenant Colonel stitched on it.

It was past operating hours at Rüstkammer base, almost time for dinner. They were at the First Barracks, where Lena resided and toiled at, on a corridor with few people around. The lazy sun before the sunset shone through the rectangular stained glass over the long summer days, and the song of birds came from afar.

“It's very late, but happy birthday...I'm sorry. I wanted to give you a present, but my personal gift to you may be a problem.

For a moment, Lena did not understand, but she soon smiled and nodded.

Vika was royalty. Even if it was a cheap present, giving a present to Lena or the Eighty-Six would be deemed a reward, a bestowment. It would have political implications.

“No. I am glad that you have this intention...”

After some thought, she continued bemusedly.

“I have received a wonderful dress.”

But those who give dresses to ladies are either families or lovers or partners. She quietly noted, but Vika shrugged gallantly.

“It is not given from me, but from the royal family. You're a guest after all...now that I think about it, I did walk a dangerous bridge back then.”

Lena did not really understand what he was saying. She tilted her little head, but he merely waved it off to dismiss it.

“Leaving that aside...what else shall I say instead?”

He turned his Imperial violet eyes away from Lena, in another direction. The neighboring barracks had a path linked to the Juggernauts hanger.

“The path leading straight to the hanger is closed for the time being.”

“Your Highness' deputy, Lord Zaitsa is currently distributing materials.”

Lerche, standing right behind Vika, added on.

Lena did not understand, and blinked away.

“...Huh?”

“In that situation, it will be bad of him to make you pick him up. He’s probably making a detour.”

“Lord Zaitsa said these documents are classified, and he does not need assistance. I suppose we do not have to pick him up.

That’s how it is, so Vika said as he left. Lena stood by the entrance of the relatively quiet corridor. It remained open as it was not night, and Vika glanced outside as he listened to the birds.

“Just wait a little longer...he should be here soon.”

Once he said this, Lena realized who he was referring to.

Located behind the barracks was the corridor uncommonly used. Hardly anyone would use this entrance as it was a little far from the cafeteria and hangar.

Outside, the golden sun shone through the emerald leaves, and shone upon a person’s silhouette.

The moment she saw him, Lena ran off.

“...Shin!”

Shin was walking from the Juggernaut hangar, through the tunnel formed by the rows of intertwined branches and leaves. He blinked away once he saw her running towards him.

“Lena...were you waiting for me here?”

“Yes. After all, I have not thanked you for the birthday present.”

Vika probably arranged for them to meet at this relatively quiet place.

The entire schedule for the day involved the testing of the Juggernaut after the system update, and it took a longer time than expected. Shin had to be in the hangar until lights out, and only had a short break for dinner. He would have to return to the hangar after dinner. Lena would not have the time or chance to thank him for the birthday present.

Shin looked a little perturbed, seemingly gaudy about something.

“You’re busy too, aren’t you, Lena? I didn’t give you anything special...I received something from you on my birthday,”

Midway through his words, Shin shook his head. He should be denying that he gave her the present, rather than acknowledge that she gave him one.

“I gave it to you because I wanted to. I think you’ll like it, since you’re so focused on work.”

Lena bloomed with a smile once she heard those words.

“Yes. But I wish to thank you too.”

She received a pretty, intricate looking music box. It was accompanied with a kaleidoscope, crafted so that one could enjoy it visually and aurally. It was not something that could be bought anywhere; surely he spent much time and effort into choosing it.

“Thank you very much...I am glad to receive it. I shall treasure it.”

Shin showed a wry smile once she said so.

“It’s great that you say so, but you don’t have to. It’s just a decoration. I shall use the bookmark I received.”

“Yes, same for me.”

The fleeting lights were accompanied with the distinct metallic sound that played a melancholic, tragic music. Every night, she had the same dream.

There was the cluster of blue butterflies in the distant azure skies, and the monstrous red spider lilies swaying with the wind. They never got to see each other’s faces back then, but they were finally reunited.

“Shin, are you going for dinner?”

“Yes...the tests will be running late. Will be headed back after I’m done with dinner.”

As expected.

“Good work there. I heard tonight’s dinner is specially prepared by the head cook.”

Lena smiled as she naturally held his hand.

It was a hearty, unburdened smile, like a large ring of elegant, silvery-white flowers.

“At least you can enjoy your meal time, I suppose?”

Army mornings start very early, and while it was dark outside, Lena began preparations in her own room.

The black cat TP had a look around her bedroom and office, which had many more things present. It merely looked at the shelves and desk, which it could not climb.

The table in her bedroom had a few presents. A little further away was a kitten photo frame with a blurred looking photo. There was also an opened collection of landscape scenes, and a canvas tote bag with some stuffed animals hanging on the wall next to it.

Lena looked towards the intricate, antique music box, and smiled.

Finally, she checked her appearance once again, straightened her peak cap, and right.

She smiled naturally, and turn around with the heels clicking gently as she skipped out of the room.

Once the door closed, there was nobody in Lena's room, and on her table,

There was a diary placed next to the music box, with a silver bookmark in between. It contained a picture of the red spider lilies and the Juggernauts. She discreetly reserved one for herself when she ordered and gave it to Shin, and when the morning summer sun finally rose to its peak, the shadows formed by the music box and the bookmark came together without anyone noticing.

August 25th: Raiden's Birthday

“—It's your birthday today?”

Raiden was suddenly asked for no reason, and frowned. He had been living in this damned Eighty-Sixth District for at least a year, and spent almost a year with this Reaper of a squad leader before him, who did not know how to talk.

He was then reminded that he, just like Shin before him, had turned thirteen.

“Ah...yeah, it's today. Speaking of which,”

He had long forgotten about it, for there was no need to remember their date of birth, let alone celebrate birthdays, in the Eighty-Sixth District.

Raiden suddenly thought of something, and asked. No way would the guy before him be possibly months older.

“When's yours?”

“I forgot.”

Shin tersely retorted, shrugging. It seemed he really forgot, rather than simply evading the topic, and he did not seem pained about that, given his voice and expression.

It would be years later that Shin learned that he was born in May, but they did not know at this point.

Shin suddenly tilted his little head.

“A birthday happens once a year. Maybe we can celebrate or something?”

“...Celebrate huh? Sounds good.”

Shin had simply forgotten his birthday, and like him, many other Eighty-Six forgot theirs. The memories before they were exiled to the Eighty-Sixth District were devoured by the flames of war, and they hardly remembered anything.

Raiden's mood was ruined when he realized he was the only one who would occasionally remember his birthday.

And then,

“So what are you really thinking?”

“It's about time this squadron's reshuffled. The guys still living aren't happy, so let's find an excuse to celebrate.”

Probably.

Raiden gave a skeptical, dumbfounded look, but Shin did not mind.

“It doesn’t look like the Legion will be moving today or tomorrow. We found a lot of sugar the last time, so we should be able to make some desserts.”

Shin suddenly giggled.

Raiden had a really, really bad feeling about it.

“We found leftover canned crackers, canned milk and eggs in that storeroom. I’ll try to make the custard tart I saw in that recipe book the last time.”

“Stop it.”

Shin’s cooking was really, horrifyingly, horrible.

He would callously skip steps, thinking they were a hassle, or sometimes repeat the steps. He never proportioned his ingredients, and never would control the fire, thinking it would be fine as long as it was cooked. In any case, his cooking was a mess.

And also, one would get the feeling his tongue was insensitive.

In cooking, one would have to set portions, and follow the steps strictly. One should never be careless in making sweets.

Shin did not seem to mind, and silently giggled.

“You don’t have to be so courteous.”

“I have a feeling my life will be in danger...seriously.”

Raiden scratched his head once he realized he was had.

It had been almost a year since they met, and the impression of the seemingly emotionless Reaper remained in his mind for that long. It was a good thing that he could joke, but what was with those crazy jokes?

“So you want to eat them? Got it, I’ll get it sorted.”

Perhaps he would use the crackers in place of tart, and put in some custard. That was still possible in the Eighty-Sixth District. Maybe they could build an oven too.

Eating sweets at this age? I guess he’s still a kid. Raiden thought, and glanced towards Shin.

However, Shin stared back at Raiden dumbfoundedly.

“No...actually, I don’t like sweets.”

“You bastard.”

KADOKAWA × Animate

“Shin! Here, Happy Valentine’s!”

The childhood neighbor girl said as she happily gave him a small packet. Shin, who was five years old, stared at it while shivering all over. It was wrapped in pink transparent paper, and looked cute, appearance-wise.

To him, the childhood friend Rita—namely Henrietta, didn’t seem to notice the fear within him as she beamed away. He whispered,

“D-Did you make this, Rita?”

“Hm...ah, it’s fine! I chose something papa didn’t faint from after eating it!”

“...”

Rita’s dad really is pitiful... so Shin thought, but he didn’t voice it out.

Usually, whenever Rita made a few desserts, her father Josef von Penrose would become a valuable sacrifice in the name of tasting. In any case, almost without fail, he would falter at a certain experimental number.

Shin wanted to retort many points about why a taste sample required experimental codes, but at this point, he did not know what to say.

“Hey, open it and have a look!”

“...Sure.”

He opened the wrapping that gave a rustling sound, and there was something akin to a biscuit.

Shin was silent for a while.

What is it?

“Ufufu. Have a guess. Who does it resemble?”

“...”

Shin pondered.

And pondered.

And thought hard.

And finally, he said what he thought.

“...A monster.”

“Hey! This is the trend this year! A portrait cookie!”

“...”

Speaking of which, this thing was black like charcoal, and if the portrait actually resembled someone, it should be round, or at least triangular, or rectangular, but for some reason, it was made in the form of a twisted star, and furthermore, he did not have three eyes.

Does Rita hate me? Shin barely managed to swallow these words. She was not malicious. Instead, she was a little, just a little...clumsy.

In any case.....would Fido eat it? Would it be pitiful to actually feed it to Fido? Either option wouldn't be nice to Rita. Shin. Looked at the little packet containing the cookie (?), and experienced the most turbulent time of his life.

“Hey Shin, Captain Nouzen. Hey.”

For unknown reasons, the young girl who was his childhood friend and today's colleague approached him with a grin, and Shin, who turned eighteen two months ago, responded to her while being highly wary inside. The experience and intuition honed through surviving seven years on the battlefield of desperation caused the alarm bells to ring in his mind.

He didn't understand what happened, but he just had a premonition. It was really bad

“...Is there anything, Major Penrose?”

“You're still giving me the cold shoulder. How many times have I told you to call me Rita? It's fine to do this even in the base. Understood, Captain?”

Shin wondered how he should address her with the rank if this was the case. As a little reminder, a Major outranks a Captain. *Obey whatever I say*, was this the power of silent pressure?

Rita...Henrietta—Annette smiled as she took something out from the pocket of her white coat.

It was a pink transparent packet...a cute little packet on appearance alone.

It was no different from the nightmare buried deep in his memories.

“It's the portrait cookie I worked so hard to make in the past, but you thought it's a monster. I wish you...well, you may think this is a monster again, but I'm trying this out again for old times' sake. I did replicate it perfectly...but I never tasted it.”

“...”

This was.

Rather than a perfect replica.

One might say it was a riskier substitute, devoid of the bare minimum of a safety harness that was Mr Penrose's sacrifice.

While Shin shivered as he stared at the little packet, Annette smirked like a mischievous cat teasing its prey.

“You'll accept it, won't you? —It's your fault for stealing my best friend.”

86—EIGHTY-SIX

School If

Summer Festival

Twenty-six-year-old Shourei Nouzen had a brother ten years younger than him, who was in the most rebellious phase of his life.

“I’m back...eh? Shin, are you going to the festival?”

“...”

He asked, seeing Shin wearing a yukata which was very rare. The latter however remained silent as usual.

Their mother’s voice came from the living room downstairs in reply instead, saying that he was going to spend the Tanabata festival with his classmate. Upon hearing that, Rei had a thought. If Shin was simply going out with his classmates, he would not be wearing a yukata.

“A date, right? How’s she like? Who is this pretty girl?”

“.....”

He was ignored.

Yep, he’s at the age when it’s really hard to understand him. Rei thought as he returned to his room, and while he was undoing his tie, he heard a voice beyond the ajar door to his room.

“Brother.”

“Yeah?”

“I can’t tie the obi.”

So Rei wanted to say, *Can’t you just wear a heko obi since it’s a man’s yukata?* But since he was asked, he might as well tie the kai-no-kuchi musubi.

“Seriously, you’re always looking for your brother whenever you have troubles. Also you’re watching anime right now...”

Rei spotted Shin watching anime on his smartphone.

Well, he’s working hard at least. Having thought this far, Rei didn’t chime in any further.

Shin’s been working really hard, and had considerably grown up as compared to his younger days when he would just rely on others whenever he encountered trouble. However, it’s not too different from asking for help whenever he felt that he couldn’t settle it himself.

Maybe I pampered him too much... While Rei started to reflect upon his actions, Shin in turn looked really disgusted.

“I never said I needed your help.”

“Yes yes, you never said it, okay?”

You’re still relying on me though. What’s different about that? Aren’t you just saying that while having me tie this for you?

Ahh, Rei sighed.

“Since you’re so arrogant, tie a bunko (light novel) knot yourself.”

“What is a light novel?”

Lady Margaret Milizé’s sixteen-year-old daughter was in the prime of her age.

“Mother, is it weird for me to be wearing this?”

“...Lena, are you asking for my thoughts on it?”

Lady Milizé answered, feeling really relieved.

Lena was standing before the tall mirror, sizing herself up and checking if there was anything inappropriate. It had been a while since she had experienced such an emotion.

Lena lifted her sleeves, turned her back towards the mirror to see the obi, and was beaming away.

“Very cute. Have confidence in yourself.”

The refreshing, orange colored yukata had bright butterfly patterns on it, and a bunko knot. It seemed rather large, but was still glamorous. The silvery white long hair matched with a satin cloth, were tied into a ponytail. The butterfly ornament matching the yukata would also creak whenever she moved.

She was dressed in a manner suitable for partying with friends. But on a closer inspection, one could see that Lena had put on makeup, which was a rarity for her. While she was trying to maintain her dignity, she hid her vibrant, pink lips.

“But...”

“A fine lady cannot have such a flustered look...have a seat and calm down. There is still some time, right?”

For some reason, Lena blushed.

“Ah, there’s still some time...”

She looked around uneasily, and after lowering her eyebrows, said with a teeny-weeny voice.

“Well, you’re waiting for someone to pick you up, no?”

Lady Milizé was a little curious.

“Ah.”

“Receive you!?”

The man who yelled was seated on the sofa in the living room, acting nonchalant as he was reading the newspaper upside down, trying to eavesdrop upon their conversation in an exaggerated manner. That man was Václav Milizé, her husband, and Lena’s father.

“Someone...will come by to receive you!? Are you going on a date with some hustler!? I don’t know which lecher is so bold...!”

“Wrong, you mean which boy.”

Lady Milizé looked over at her husband with bewilderment.

“...Dear, did you return from work early today?”

“Impossible!? It is a father’s responsibility to worry about his daughter! What if something happens!?”

Lady Milizé walked over, and looked at her husband as if he was a fool.

“Fo...do you know how overprotective you are being?”

“Repeat yourself! Sort out what you say!”

“Are you a fool?”

“Sort yourself out!”

“Do you know that you are acting like my father did while I was still a student? Your skin is as thick as the Gran Mur.”

“So you say...”

While the two of them were arguing, the intercom bell rang.

This time, Lena reacted as though her invisible cat ears had pricked up. Before her boorish husband had realized, Lady Milizé waved her hand without looking at Lena, who nodded and hurried towards the corridor.

By the time her husband found Lena missing, it was already over.

“I am leaving! —Kept you waiting, Shin...”

The uneasy look from before had vanished without a trace, and only the cheerful cheers and the footsteps of the geta echoed.

Summer Festival – Reverse

“.....Hey.”

The Tanabata Summer Festival was held on a large grassland by the riverbank. As the night breeze blew, the shops and lantern lights formed shadows out of the bamboos, tanzaku and passers-by.

Amongst them, there were two passing past the stalls was a bellflower colored yukata with a silvery-white ponytail, along with someone with black hair watching the yukata from behind. Perhaps these two people knew each other?

“Why are we moving together?”

Another duo was at a riverbank slope away from the crowds. Annette said, wondering about this situation while picking up a little octopus from her takoyaki, a famous delicacy of this festival.

“Why exactly? I don’t know either.”

Kiriya answered as he munched on crunchy rich yakisoba, another staple of the festival.

Kiriya was Shin’s older cousin by four years, and recognized the face of Annette, who was Shin’s childhood friend. Their houses were somewhat nearby, and they so happened to encounter each other on the way to the festival. For some reason, they ended up walking together.

Annette was wearing a cool, light blue yukata with red goldfish patterns, while Kiriya was wearing an old-fashioned dark blue yukata that was a little worn out. They were not lovers or anything, but their clothing complimented each other so well it was not funny. When they first spotted each other, she reacted in an unexpectedly cute, awkward manner, and tapped the back of her purse lightly.

Before their eyes were the back silhouettes of the bellflower colored yukata and the black yukata, appearing to be enjoying themselves as they kept walking.

The food stalls were becoming less popular, and people were off to try games like goldfish scoop. Eating the Blue Hawaii ice changed the colors of Shin’s tongue, who stuck it out towards Lena, leaving her surprised. Lena then challenged the doll fishing game, and reeled in an unexpectedly large one, but as it would be unsightly of her to carry such a large one, Shin ended up carrying it. For some reason, he was holding a cute white pig doll in a uniform.

Well.

What?

Even from afar, it was obvious. The passers-by looked over at them, smiling, as they saw the sweet and sour-like flirting of the couple doing so for the first time. As neither of them were accustomed to this, it was gaudy and tedious on their part.

Tailing them through the ridiculous crowd, she heard a cute shriek there. *What are you doing?* Annette wondered.

Do they know that when people come to such places, the first thing to do is to escort each other by holding hands? Guess they're lacking in that experience, so Kiriya thought.

There was no one around acting like an aunt, however.

"Ramune. Want some?"

"Thank you."

Right when Annette was finished with the takoyaki, she was handed a uniquely shaped bottle, and received with thanks. She tilted it, and the distinct clear taste of the carbonated water slid down her throat. There was a glass marble inside the bottle, making sounds.

It seemed that was something to be taken out. The backs of the young childhood friend boy and his partner did not seem like they would grow.

"Fuu. Thank you for this. This really is a festival after all—"

"Normally, I'll prefer something like beer at this moment. But I'm hanging out with a lady now."

It seemed he would never drink whenever women were around.

Also, he did not like sweet things anymore. Annette looked up briefly towards the sidelong face that was frowning subtly.

Shin and Kiriya were cousins, and really resembled each other. The latter was older, and had different eye colors, but beyond that, there were no visible differences.

Four years later,

Will Shin too become such a dignified man?

Annette could not imagine that. They had been acquaintances since a young age, and she could not imagine Shin becoming such a person.

They did not bicker, and they were still friends, somewhat. They had been together for the entire time, but she did not know what to do about him.

Suddenly, light footsteps hurried over. A girl with long black hair was dressed in a firework-patterned yukata, coupled with a heko obi tied in a butterfly knot. It was Kiriya's little sister, Frederica.

"Kiriya. Kiriya."

"What is it, Princess?"

Kiriya answered, and stood up. Annette looked over, looking really confused.

"Eh, aren't you guys siblings? Why are you calling each other that?"

"I don't know. It's like the name stuck. If I don't call her that, she'll be really angry."

Aren't you pampering her too much...? While Annette was having such thought, the oblivious siscon of a brother lifted the little sister who came running over.

"Kiriya. I want some apple candy."

"I'm not eating that. Peach candy."

"Enough already. Hurry up."

"Yes yes.....here, Annette."

Saying that, Kiriya naturally reached his hand out to Annette. They were not lovers. It was simply a gesture of him taking care of a sister.

Four years later, Shin would most likely have that face, the face of an adult male.

"You're eating too, right?"

".....I guess."

Thus, Annette stood up without holding that hand. *Yes, we are not lovers. Just a childhood friend, and me.*

Then, she found the silver haired and black haired duo before her at the apple candy store. For some reason, Frederica was looking really anxious.

"But first, I want some chocolate banana. I'll treat you to that, Kiriya."

Ehhh!? Frederica was dumbfounded, and Kiriya realized what was going on. In response, his lips curled into a smile.

"Alright Princess. Shall I go along with you?"

Ehh—! Both of them ignored Frederica's protests.

Her Highness Buying Food and the Reaper of the Kendo Club

Unable to bear with it anymore, she was left with no choice.

Lena slipped out of the back door to purchase the winter limited milk chocolate bun from the convenience store behind the high school. She knew it was unsightly of her, but she took a large mouthful.....only to hear rustling from the flowerbed behind her, freezing up. At the overly large garden of the high school, there was a kendo dojo by the side of the pretty ginkgo tree.

Showing up was a black haired, impressionable bloody-eyed boy, dressed in the blue kendo gear.

Behind the unpopular dojo was Lena, who was seated on the wooden bench covered with golden leaves, terrified of being spotted as she ate. The typically stoic red eyes too were dumbfounded.

Finding this amusing, he gave a mischievous grin.

“You broke the rules, student council president.”

“Shin.....! W-why are you here!?”

In any case, Shin was holding a bamboo broom with one hand, sweeping. The dojo was right next to the impressive looking ginkgo tree, and in Autumn, lots of leaves would fall. If he did not sweep every day, the path would be covered in leaves.

This unexpected encounter should not have happened.

Before Shin could say anything more, Lena ended up stammering as she was talking too fast. She, who typically ignored the school rules to buy food, was finally caught by Shin. She was distraught.

“I shall bribe you with one mouthful, so please keep quiet about it!”

“.....You say that, but didn’t you buy too much?”

“It is fine. It is not like you can finish it.”

Lena handed over the meat bun to a dumbfounded Shin, who sat next to her on the bench, and explained herself honestly.

However, Lena herself never wonder why she bought food she could not finish.

While giving a mystified look, Shin finished the meat bun in two mouthfuls or so, while Lena enjoyed the chocolate bun, thinking as she looked at him. He is a boy after all. He was half a head taller, his voice was different, and at this distance, she could feel much heat from him.

She found the hems of her blazer and pleated skirt a little messy, so she adjusted them discreetly.

Fortunately or not, Shin did not notice the hems shaking.

“It’s rare to see you snacking at this time. Another student council meeting today?”

“Yes. Preparations for the school festival is in full swing. It will be late when I head home.”

While it was great that the festival remained big every year, there were many difficulties involved in the preparations and adjustments.

After some thought, Shin said,

“Need me to send you back home? After school?”

“Eh?”

The unexpected words left Lena a little confused, and she made a strange squeal. It would be late, and he would be sending her back. In other words.

They would be on the way home, just the two of them.

If it were a (female) classmate, it would be normal. Maybe it was because he did not realize what he said.

Despite that, Lena was blushing furiously, and Shin did not notice.

“This area especially doesn’t have lots of people around at night. I don’t think it’s a good idea to let a girl return home alone.”

“But.....will that not cause you problems?”

“Not really. I normally practice till late at night, and I won’t really stay for longer. Also, I can’t just be waiting.”

The reddened face looked up, and Shin shrugged calmly, looking a little gleeful.

“Our club hasn’t really prepared anything for the school festival. Since I took the bribe, I have to repay.”

The Sports Hall After School

Bam. The hard ball bounced, making a blunt sound resembling a metal wheel hitting the wooden floor, creating a ruckus amongst several students.

Most of them were boys, along with a few girls.

“——Daaaaaaa!! Shit, it rimmed out!”

“Hmph, nice chance, Theo. Hit it!”

“No Kaie, you know I slipped here!! ——Aarrggghh I know this would happen!”

“You two are bad at this man. Let’s settle this——”

“.....It’s really impressive how you never hit one, Raiden-san! I’m amazed——”

“Shut up Daiya! Who’s the first one to leave the basketball club in the first place!?”

“But I slipped. Not my fault!”

“Yay! It’s iinnnnn!”

“Shiden, over to you.”

“Righto! I’m going to beat you two up!”

“Shin! Wait!”

“Always at this time, you guys——ah shit!?”

“.....What are you guys doing?”

With a thud, the metal doors were opened. Iska asked, his arms folded together as he leaned on the door. The dark blue blazer formed a huge contrast to the natural silver hair, along with the gold trimmed school crest unique to the third years.

There were two basketball courts on the vast sports hall this high school was proud of. On each side of the basketball courts, there were ladder shapes formed out of tape. There were ten or so boys and girls standing behind the shorter side, the free throw line. All of them looked over in unison.

Under the hoops hanging from the ceiling, the tall one and short one—Raiden and Theo—were standing together, sighing.

Looking at the situation, it appeared they were playing a game involving a basketball and a hoop. It seemed they were to stand behind the free throw line, and

shoot in order. If they miss, they have to keep shooting until they make a shot. In the meantime, if anyone after them scores, the ones before who failed to score will be eliminated. The rules were simple. There were only three basketballs, and at most, one can eliminate two.

Shin went to pick up the old basketball bouncing on the floor (nearly falling over), and answered,

“What’s the name called, Knockout?”

“Nobody’s asking what’s the game called. Anyway, isn’t the floor to be waxed today or something?”

For that reason, all club activities in the sports hall were suspended for the day.

Each club had to assign someone to help wax the floor, by drawing lots. As one of those involved, Shin looked over at a corner of the sports hall. There were lots of mops used to wax the floor, just left there.

On a side note, the kendo dojo is located elsewhere, and the kendo club activities were not held in the gym, but it relied heavily on the other clubs. All the sports clubs were to handle menial tasks like cleaning the grounds, clearing the leaves around the dojo, and waxing the floor.

“We got a lot of guys with nothing to do. Didn’t spend too much time finishing up everything.”

“.....”

It seemed strange, but Shin seemed to have a knack of making friends.

Because of that, it was pretty normal to play games on the court after the floor is waxed.

“Even if I give you a hundred steps leeway, don’t do this stupid thing after waxing the floor. There’s no point waxing now, is there?”

The floor was still slippery after all.

But despite that, Shin remained blase about it.

Iska was a year older than Shin, and they were of different clubs. Shin never addressed him in formal language, not showing him any respect as a senior.

“There’s still some time.....you fine with this, Alice-senpai?”

“What, Iska? You got a problem?”

Looking over, the female retired captain of the kendo club appeared to be there. She had long black hair, and she was shaking her head.

He saw her lips curl into a smile, and clicked his tongue, averting his eyes. Since their freshmen year, they were in the same class the entire time, having formed a rotten bond. He had difficulties dealing with her.

“You playing? It’s slippery.”

“Sounds interesting.”

“Now that you mentioned it, I had a day like this during my first year. There was some time after the floor was waxed, so I suggested that we play dodgeball, but you didn’t let me.”

“Huh? When did that happen?”

“.....Captain, actually, we want to play dodgeball.....”

Shin muttered straight to the point. Either way, it seemed Alice did not hear him.

“Seriously.....you want me to report you to the school if you say that again? What if someone else shows up right now.....?”

Speak of the devil.

Iska felt some domineering force behind him, and immediately froze.

He did his best to compose himself, so that the juniors facing would not realize. He retreated quietly to the side, and glanced towards the girl. Then, he noticed it was a short, slender girl with long silver hair.

The girl spoke up. The faint pink links showed a kind smile.

She followed with the voice of a silver bell.

“——Shin?”

Shin, who had maintained a stoic look the entire time, suddenly gave a tense look Iska noticed.

“I heard you are waxing the floor here, so what exactly are you doing now?”

The Queen of the School

There was a convenience store down the slope behind the high school, and the boy walking out from there frowned once he saw Lena.

Lena looked up at the face half a head taller than she was, and teasingly pointed with her index finger.

“Hm hm. You broke the school rules, Shin.”

“...Lena.”

Shin sighed, and at the same time, resigned himself to this fate. This scene had repeated countless times ever since he enrolled.

“Sorry to trouble you every time, student council president.”

“It is work after all...do not think that you can silence me with a bribe.”

Saying that, Lena opened her mouth in a childish manner.

“Just one mouthful.”

The shaved lemon ice was divided equally down the middle using two sticks.

At the parking lot of the convenience store was a no-parking sign by a large tree, and next to it was a bench. Lena’s legs were closed together as she beamed away, enjoying the faint blue, icy, sweet ice snack.

The sun was shining really brightly in the summer afternoon. In this residential area filled with much greenery however, it was cooling to remain under the shade, probably due to the breeze. The eyes had adapted to the greenery, staring at the dazzling, blooming midsummer scenery like a daydream.

Boys typically had higher body warmth, and Lena assumed that Shin must be feeling hot. While she had yet to finish her dessert, Shin had already opened the second pack. The arm showing from the sleeve looked somewhat sweaty.

Just to note, Lena never thought about why Shin went to the convenience store alone to purchase two servings of lemon popsicles.

“Thank you for this. As thanks, what shall I deliver for our next club activity? Something handmade?”

“...Yeah. Something like a powder drink mix added to water.”

Shin tersely noted, ngghhh, and Lena's cheeks were puffed. She, a princess, never held a kitchen knife, nor entered a kitchen except during cooking lessons, and was really bad at it.

She was bad at it, and nobody looked forward to her cooking, but she was really miffed by this.

"I think that as the winner of the pageant contest, a handmade item from you will delight those guys at the club, Your Highness."

The question was no longer whether the youths at the club would be excited.

Leaving that aside, Lena was completely flushed.

There was an annual beauty pageant contest during the school festival, and needless to say, the results last year were obvious. Thanks to her classmates' scheming, Lena was voted first for cosplaying in a fiery military uniform.

"Ah, that is..."

"It was really a fight, but as to be expected, you won, Your Highness."

"So I say, stop calling me 'Your Highness'...!"

Well.

It was unknown who started it, but ever since the school festival, Lena was dubbed 'Her Highness'.

The reason was probably the official looking military cap and the intimidating army uniform.

"I am really happy that many supported me, and...really happy to win it all, but, calling me 'Your Highness'...!"

"Doesn't it suit you very well, Your Highness?"

"So I say, stop calling me that! This is an order! I-I am ordering you as the Queen!"

Lena yelled, her face clearly red even under the tree shade.

Seeing that, Shin chuckled.

"Sure, Your Highness...I can't hear you."

Happy New Year

Winter vacation is different from summer. It is shorter, and due to various events, it did not seem like a vacation.

Before the end of the year, Daiya's room was in a complete mess, and after an (continued) attempt to clean up, he gave up. Daiya held back a yawn as he walked down the road to school, the sunlight stinging his eyes. During the end of year, he had to visit his grandmother's house at the farm, and accompany his relatives' children with poker, games, karuta and hanafuda; his life over the past few days was topsy-turvy. The gold morning sunlight was bright and clear, dyeing his eyes amidst the frigid air of January.

Wiping off the tears in his eyes, Daiya spotted a slender figure.

The person had long blueish silver hair, and was wearing a cute pastel blue peacoat and a uniform skirt that seemed a little too cold for this weather.

"Oh, Anju."

"Ah, Daiya. Good morning...no."

After saying that, Anju stopped.

Daiya too stopped before her.

They inhaled.

"Happy New Year."

"Please continue to take care of me this year."

They proceeded with the formal greetings.

Even when a new year arrives, it did not necessarily mean that things would exactly change, even though it felt so.

Looking around, similar scenes could be seen on their way to school.

Shin and Lena apparently went to the shrine together, Kaie, Kurena and Shiden went to do their first sales. They probably had exchanged new year greetings. Daiya himself was one of those who returned to his hometown, as aforementioned. Anju too had returned to her hometown, and this was the first day she met up with her friends.

They continued their way to school, walking next to each other.

Anju had a muffler on her; it was a Christmas gift from the previous year——ten days ago. Daiya noticed, and his cheeks relaxed.

Similarly, there was the pass holder dangling from Daiya's bag. It was given by Anju, who beamed as she spotted it, but Daiya did not notice.

“Guess we can't relax as much next year as we are now.”

“Exams are important! But...do make sure you do not catch a cold.”

Saying that, Anju giggled.

“Just worried about a cold? Sure can be relaxed when you're one of the top scorers.”

“Ahh...”

Daiya grimaced as he scratched his head.

Everyone would call it ‘surprising’, but Daiya was one of the better performing students. As for how good he was, he was capable of being ranked one of the top twenty during their regular tests.

On a side note, while Anju was smiling away, she was always competing for the highest scoring girl with Lena every time.

“Well, Shin and the other guys have to cheat again. That guy definitely did it on purpose during the mid-terms.”

“Our homeroom teacher, that ‘chief of staff’ really has a smile that can kill...”

The young teacher was dubbed this moniker, for though he was a young teacher, his personality and smile were ridiculously terrifying.

In any case, they had no real goal in life, and would not take their exams seriously. However, they did go overboard trying to cheat.

Leaving aside Annette and Kaie, who were not caught, Shin and Raiden were blatantly cheating for the subjects they did not care about, Theo was just copying everything, hoping to attain average scores. Shiden was hoping to get everything right while copying away. Kurena and Haruto gave up as they found it to be a bother. Furthermore, everyone had to work hard for the sports meet before the tests, and the school festival after. Surely one could imagine them in a sorry state.

On a side note, the best of the lot was Vika, who scored perfectly average marks for every single subject. It was not a coincidence. He deduced the scoring and weightage of the tests, and just had to answer the questions that would get him to the average score.

These guys are geniuses at using their minds for useless purposes.

Daiya himself was a little miffed that his friends were blatantly cheating.

“Well, Lena’s angry about that. Especially Shin. She just told him, you got to revise of this well.”

Before their eyes was Lena, walking in her school uniform with a serious look.

For her at least, a student’s duty is to study. It was no wonder she would end up saying that.

“According to the test results rankings, we’re going to hold a study meet starting January. Everyone got to buck up.”

“Even if you say that, I suppose it’s just a regular gathering to play…….”

Lena’s idea was probably not too bad.

Simply put, it was not that everyone was dumb, and there was no real need to organize a study meet.

They just did not want to study, to score high in all their subjects.

Daiya burst out laughing imagining his friends being carefree about their studies, and how infuriated Lena would be.

“...Sounds rather interesting. Can we join too, Anju?”

Anju smiled in response.

“Of course. But Lena might get a little angry...we will end up playing anyway.”

At this time next year, surely.

There might not be study sessions for everyone to enjoy together.

Merry Christmas

Lena had received the menu handed over by the waiter wearing a Christmas cap, and had been staring at it for almost twenty minutes.

From time to time, her face looked perturbed, or unwittingly everchanging. Shin too sank into deep thought as he witnessed so.

She either frowned, dropped her lips, tilted her head left, right, or pursed her lips. For the time being, he ordered some tea and coffee. Her tea was left aside, gradually turning cold, while he was almost done with his coffee, but he was not frustrated in the slightest, for he could keep looking at her cute, gaudy expressions.

Who are you making excuses for? He could hear his brother's retort, somehow (though it was a hallucination), but he paid no heed to it.

They were at a cafe next to a train station, closest to school, facing the courtyard of the department store, seated by the window. The sky got darker with the fading sun outside the window, and the fake candle wax decorations of the large Christmas tree shone upon the happy pedestrians. It was Christmas, and there was a sweet atmosphere in the cafe. An aged waiter was dressed in traditional old clothing, wearing a Christmas cap, smiling at the young lovers

Anyway,

Lena continued to frown, looking troubled, so Shin quietly lent assistance.

"If you can't make up your mind, how about we order both and share half?"

"Fueeh!?"

He could never get sick of her varied expressions. It's Christmas, just days from the winter solstice, and the nights were long. Naturally, he intended to send her home, for her family would be worried if she returned home too late.

For some reason, Lena's expression resembled a mouse that had fallen before a cat.

"Eh, h-how do you know that I'm wondering which Christmas cake set to choose!?"

"..."

Of course.

Twenty minutes passed, and Lena had been looking at the page showing the limited Christmas cake set (two types). Anyone could tell that she had been comparing the black cat santa whatever set and the white cat santa whatever.

The whatever part should be the cake name, and Shin had been wondering what it was, but he could not tell due to the attached photos, but it was fine.

“...But, is this really fine? I do want to eat both though...”

“I don’t really know what to order.”

“And Shin, you don’t like sweets...”

“Doesn’t mean that I don’t eat them at all.”

The reason why Shin disliked sweets was because of his neighbor and childhood friend, whose baking had left him traumatized. He would not buy anything, but he would eat some sweets made by his bad friends.

“But...”

Lena however seemed a little guilty, and started to feel frustrated.

Shin chose to ignore her, and called for the waiter.

“Ah, so delicious...~”

“Yeah.”

The white rabbit set contained ripped sweet white peach with powdered sugar, and certainly felt gentler compared to the black cat set that had bitter chocolate and Western liquor. The cat and rabbit too were cute, decorated with Christmas hats made of almond paste.

Lena’s eyes were blaring light as she flailed her fork, and she finally put it down, leaning forward.

“Erm, Shin, can I ask you to accompany me later for shopping? Or...well, if there’s anything you want, I’ll buy it as a present.”

“Sure...”

Shin put down the second cup of coffee, and nodded.

“I was going to ask the same, actually. Well...if there’s anything you want, mind if I get it as a gift for you?”

“.....Yesterday, Daiya...”

“My plan got ruined because he suddenly said that...”

In any case, they had planned to buy presents the previous day, but they could not as their classmate Daiya suddenly yelled “We’re having a Christmas party today! No objections!” and they were practically dragged over.

They were relieved, and sighed at this mutual friend of theirs, giving wry smiles.

“Actually, I do not know what to give a boy. I have been wondering.”

“I don’t know what a girl likes either. I spent much effort looking for one.”

The almond paste cat and rabbit on the tray collapsed, seemingly overwhelmed by the surrounding mood, but the duo did not notice so.

Credits

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